# The Influence of Perceived Spending Behaviors on Relationship Satisfaction

Sonya Britt, John E. Grable, Briana S. Nelson Goff, and Mark White

*Financial spending behaviors and relationship satisfaction are generally thought to be linked for many couples. The current study examined how perceived personal, partner, and joint spending behaviors influence relationship satisfaction. The sample consisted of residents from several communities within one mid-western state (N = 347). Spending behavior items were used to examine the interrelationship between perceived financial spending behaviors and relationship satisfaction. Results indicated that partner spending behaviors, but not one's own or joint spending behaviors, influence relationship satisfaction. Other factors associated with relationship satisfaction included self-esteem and financial stressors. Findings suggest a need for marriage and family therapists and financial counselors and planners to consider financial behaviors, namely spending activities, as an important element when providing counseling services.*

*Key Words: couples, financial behaviors, perception, relationship satisfaction, spending*

## Introduction

Relationship satisfaction, defined as the measurement of a person's feelings and thoughts about their marriage or similar intimate relationship (Hendrick, 1988), is one of the most examined topics within the fields of family studies and marriage and family therapy (Emery & Lloyd, 2001). The construct has not been studied as much or as in depth in the financial counseling and planning literature. In the family studies literature, relationship satisfaction has been linked with partner communication strategies, decision making skills, and conflict negotiation (Dindia, 2000). Although many marriage and family therapists (MFTs) have indicated that interpersonal money attitudes and behaviors are often at the root of relationship problems (Amato & Previti, 2003), very few empirical studies have been conducted to determine the specific role that financial behaviors (perceived and actual) play in influencing relationship satisfaction. Rarely does the issue of financial behaviors, be they personal, partner, or joint behaviors, get examined in relationship and marital satisfaction studies (Kerkmann, Lee, Lown, & Allgood, 2000).

Understanding the association between financial behaviors (e.g., spending activities) and relationship satisfaction can play an important role in how MFTs and financial counselors and planners work with clients because couples often report that financial behaviors are a cause of relationship distress (Cano, Christian-Herman, O'Leary, & Avery-Leaf, 2002; Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2004). In the realm of help-seeking, Aniol and Snyder (1997) found that approximately one third of all couples who sought financial counseling in their sample also reported relationship problems that were above the mean number of relational problems found in their general community sample. They also noted that approximately one third of couples who sought marriage and family therapy reported financial disagreements that were above the mean levels reported in their community sample. At a minimum, there appears to be a reciprocal overlap between financial behavior problems and relationship difficulties.

Conclusions from other studies have shown that financial behaviors are a reported cause for divorce (Terling-Watt,

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2001). For example, spending money "foolishly" was shown to be foretelling of divorce in a study by Amato and Rogers (1997). Cutrona et al. (2003) used the Family Stress Model to demonstrate how financial strain decreases the quality of family interactions. They found several items to be predictive of relationship satisfaction. For instance, age, education, number of years married, and observed warmth from partner were all positively related to relationship satisfaction; financial strain and observed hostility from a partner were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction. Of particular relevance to the Cutrona et al. study was the finding that people who reported higher financial strain also reported lower levels of relationship satisfaction.

The goal of the present research project was to determine how perceived personal, partner, and joint spending behaviors affect relationship satisfaction. Therapists, counselors, and financial planners who are interested in bridging the gap between personal finance topics and relationship satisfaction issues will find that the associations between how people perceive spending behaviors within their relationship and relationship satisfaction are relevant to their daily practices. Understanding these associations can help MFTs and financial counselors and planners better serve the interests of their clients.

## Background Review

Although the amount of literature is not particularly large, nearly all previous studies that have addressed the finance-relationship connection have found that personal and couple financial behaviors are one of the primary reasons for relationship dissatisfaction, which occasionally results in relationship dissolution or divorce (Cano et al., 2002; Markman et al., 2004). If this is true, it is reasonable to conclude that an association among perceived and actual financial behaviors and relationship distress might exist. Obtaining a better understanding of the connection may help in the prediction of relationship satisfaction. The following review of literature addresses research related to spending behavior perceptions and other factors thought to influence relationship satisfaction.

### *Perceived Spending Behaviors*

Although MFTs and financial counselors and planners are quick to recognize associations between and among financial behaviors, perception of behaviors, and relationship satisfaction (Berry & Williams, 1987; Kerkmann et al., 2000; Poduska & Allred, 1990), it is useful to note that little research has been conducted to document these associations. Applied research within the financial counseling and planning literature has been particularly lacking. One study that has added considerable understanding to the way in which a couple's financial situation impacts the relationship was conducted by Lawrence, Thomasson, Wozniak, and Prawitz (1993). They found that disagreements about money in relationships are pervasive. They noted that the positive association between money disagreements and relationship conflict and dissolution, as first discussed by Poduska and Allred (1990), are common across the population, regardless of education or household income. Lawrence and her associates did conclude that arguments about financial matters in a relationship decrease with age. This was an important finding because it suggested that younger couples who face money management conflicts may be more likely to dissolve their relationship. As Grable, Britt, and Cantrell (2007) proposed, those couples, especially ones comprised of young partners who have regular disagreements, will tend to be those that dissolve early.

Although prior research has noted that couples who seek financial counseling may also have concerns about their relationship (e.g., Aniol & Snyder, 1997), there is a paucity of research on the effect that perceived personal, partner, and couple spending behaviors have on relationship satisfaction. Poduska and Allred (1990) were among the original researchers who laid the groundwork to explore the role individual financial management behavior has on relationship satisfaction. They noted, as did Kerkmann and her associates (2000), that it is likely for a person's perception of individual and partner financial behaviors—especially spending behaviors—to influence relationship satisfaction. The present study attempted to test this assertion.

It is important to note that other variables were likely to be associated with relationship satisfaction as well. A discussion of the factors that were thought to have a direct association with relationship satisfaction is presented below. The review suggested that demographic and socioeconomic factors, psychosocial factors, and financial stressors in addition to perceived financial spending behaviors may affect a person's reported relationship satisfaction in addition to perceived financial spending behaviors.

### *Demographic and Socioeconomic Factors*

A variety of demographic factors have been known to influence relationship satisfaction (e.g., age, gender, employment status, number of children in the household, race/ethnic background, attained educational level, home ownership, and household income). Of particular importance has been the effect of age on relationship satisfaction. Although mixed findings have been reported in the literature, relationship satisfaction has appeared to be influenced by the age of each partner (Amato & Previti, 2003; Wu & Penning, 1997). Amato and Previti (2003), for instance, looked at age as it relates to the length of the relationship. They found that couples tend to lose similar interests over time, which may result in lower relationship satisfaction among couples who have been together longer and are likely older in age. However, Wu and Penning (1997) found that couples who have been together longer are subject to survivorship bias, meaning that the longer they are together, the more likely they are to stay in the relationship because any differences faced in early marriage obviously have not led to marital dissolution; as couples grow older they are likely, according to Wu and Penning, to share similar preferences, tastes, and opinions.

Gender has played a particularly important role in determining relationship satisfaction. Gender, as a research factor, has undergone major shifts in conceptualization over the last century (Emery & Lloyd, 2001) and is no longer considered a simple biological difference. As such, it is likely that men and women may have perceived financial spending and relationship satisfaction differently, holding all other factors constant. Men and women sometimes have had very different ideas about who should manage shared money and who should spend the family income. It has been reasonable to conclude that the struggle with money management decisions among couples often leads to general expectation and communication issues and conflicts (Amato & Previti, 2003; Terling-Watt, 2001). These issues and conflicts, in turn, could have altered a person's satisfaction with their relationship.

Relationship satisfaction has also appeared to be related to the employment status of partners, perhaps due to the increased difficulty of maintaining relationship equality when both partners work outside of the home. The number of women working for pay outside the home has been on the rise for more than half a century, and general themes resulting from this shift in work norms have begun to emerge (Stier & Lewin-Epstein, 2000). For example, issues of concern for dually employed households have included shared housework, mutual and active involvement in childcare, joint decision making, equal access to and influence over finances, and value of both partners' work and life goals (Zimmerman, 2003). Maintaining equality was the most highly rated factor of relationship satisfaction in Zimmerman's (2003) study, suggesting that employment status may be associated with how people evaluate their relationship satisfaction.

It has been noted that individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds tend to have lower relationship satisfaction than couples from the same racial and ethnic background (Negy & Snyder, 2000). Specifically, members of diverse racial and ethnic groups have tended to evaluate relationship satisfaction and money management roles in relationships differently than non-Hispanic Whites. These differences were often noted in terms of education as well. Well-educated individuals usually have been able to communicate more effectively than less educated individuals, which helped alleviate or reduce stress levels that arose in relationships (Amato & Previti, 2003). Because of their increased communication skills, well-educated individuals have been better able to maintain equality in the relationship (Stier & Lewin-Epstein, 2000). Less educated couples (i.e., high school diploma or less) often have encountered more stress in their relationship as a result of their lack of communication skills (Amato & Previti, 2003). Some of these communication deficits may have led to stress due to negatively perceived financial behaviors.

Household variables have often been thought to impact relationship satisfaction, although the research results regarding the association between children present in the household and relationship satisfaction are ambiguous. For instance, Wu and Penning (1997) found that a child (or children) living in the household is generally not the primary stated reason for relationship conflict among couples. However, if a partner brought children to a new relationship from a previous relationship or if a child was conceived prior to marriage, then the couple may have experienced more instability within their relationship (Wu & Penning, 1997). It is more likely, however, that higher stability levels (and therefore higher reported relationship satisfaction) from couples are associated with home ownership. Home ownership is predicted on the size and stability of household income, which is, itself, known to have a strong positive connection with different measures of life satisfaction. For example, Joo and Grable (2004) found that financial satisfaction generally increases as household income increases, whereas Grable et al. (2007) noted a strong positive association between financial satisfaction and relationship satisfaction. Other researchers have shown that household income can sometimes be used to predict divorce, which is indicative of low relationship satisfaction (Amato & Previti, 2003; Terling-Watt, 2001). When taken together, these findings suggest that households with greater income are both likely to own their own home and report higher levels of relationship satisfaction.

### *Psychosocial Factors*

Personal psychosocial factors, such as self-esteem, have been found to play a role in the way an individual perceives and acts in his or her world (Lowenstein, 1994). Self-esteem, defined as "the cluster of complimentary feelings and attitudes you hold about yourself and could mean the difference between a sense of success or failure as a human being," has been known to be associated with relationship satisfaction (Didato, 2003, p. 184). Siegel (1990) specifically looked at how individuals impulsively spend money to positively alter their self-esteem. Siegel noted that the way an individual spends money is often a method used to deal with other personal issues (e.g., depression). Allen and Baucom (2006) noted that married individuals, for instance, report a desire for greater personal self-esteem as a reason for becoming involved in an extramarital relationship. This finding is important in that those with lower relationship satisfaction may have been more likely to explore other relationships to increase their self-esteem. They may have also used money as a tool to change their self-perception through certain types of financial behaviors.

### *Financial Stress*

Negative financial life events (e.g., the loss of a job) have been found to negatively affect relationship satisfaction (Cutrona et al., 2003). Not surprisingly, those with lower income levels have generally experienced greater financial stress than others (Amato & Previti, 2003; Lantz, House, Mero, & Williams, 2005). Lantz and her associates (2005) found that those with lower socioeconomic status tend to experience greater health problems, which, more often than not, results in even greater financial stress. Research has indicated that there is potential for a cybernetic system that involves financial stress, general health, and satisfaction to evolve. Consider a person who has experienced high financial stress. This may have led to relationship distress and ill health. The person may have experienced further erosion in relationship satisfaction as attempts were made to obtain resources to alleviate the financial stress. If the process continued long enough, it is possible that the person's relationship would fail.

### *Summary*

As this brief review of the literature has suggested, there are a number of factors associated with how a person evaluates his or her relationship satisfaction. A person's perception of personal, partner, and joint spending behaviors is of particular relevance in understanding how someone assesses their level of satisfaction. However, it is essential to account for demographic and socioeconomic factors, psychosocial variables such as self-esteem, and financial stressors when testing the association between perceived spending behaviors and relationship satisfaction. Without first accounting for these types of intervening variables, it may not be possible to truly gauge the importance of perceived spending behaviors as factors that influence relationship satisfaction.

## Theoretical Framework

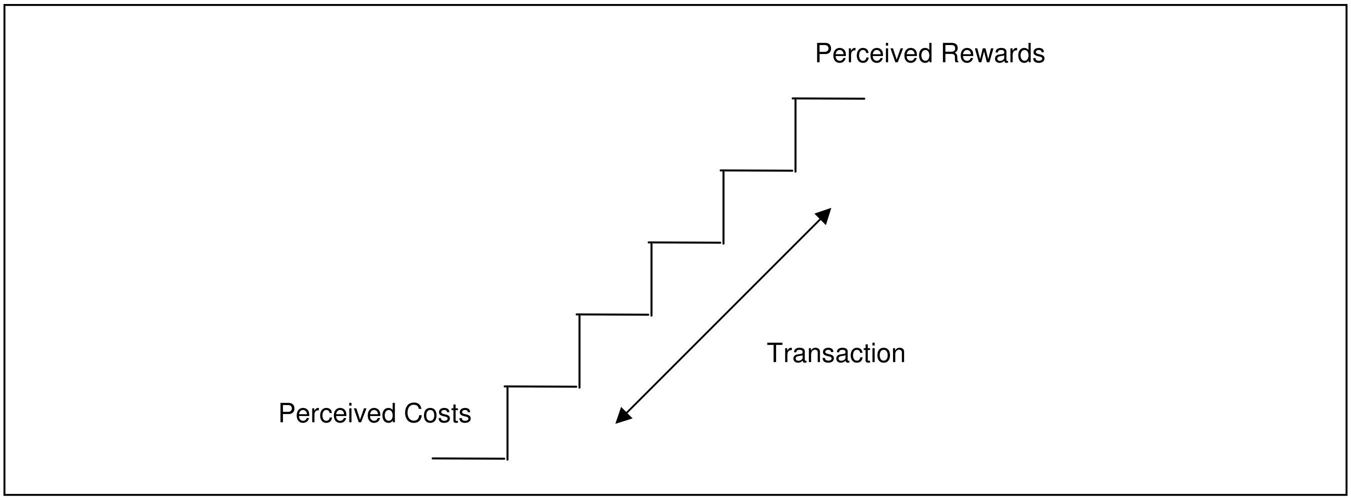
Social exchange theory can be used as a theoretical framework to better understand how and why perceived personal, partner, and joint spending behaviors and relationship satisfaction are interrelated. This theoretical framework illustrates how differences in perceptions influence how partners view the same event as either a reward or cost to the relationship (e.g., perception of individual, partner, and joint spending behaviors).

According to social exchange theory, any physical, social, or psychological pleasure is classified as a reward. A cost, therefore, is classified as anything a person dislikes, a negative reward, or an opportunity cost (Ingoldsby, Smith, & Miller, 2004; White & Klein, 2002). When rewards exceed the costs in a transaction, a profit occurs. Conversely, a loss results when the costs exceed the rewards. People calculate this ratio of rewards to costs to determine which alternative to choose when making decisions (White & Klein, 2002). Assessing rewards and costs related to relationship decisions is very common (Ingoldsby et al., 2004).

As shown in Figure 1, the rewards and costs of a transaction can be demonstrated through the use of a *staircase scale*. Perceived costs are viewed lower in a profitable transaction compared to rewards. The staircase scale assumes that each new transaction is equally balanced between costs and rewards and moves toward either end when perceived costs and benefits occur.

The framework in Figure 1 is used in the current study to illustrate how those involved in a significant relationship perceive personal, partner, and joint financial spending and

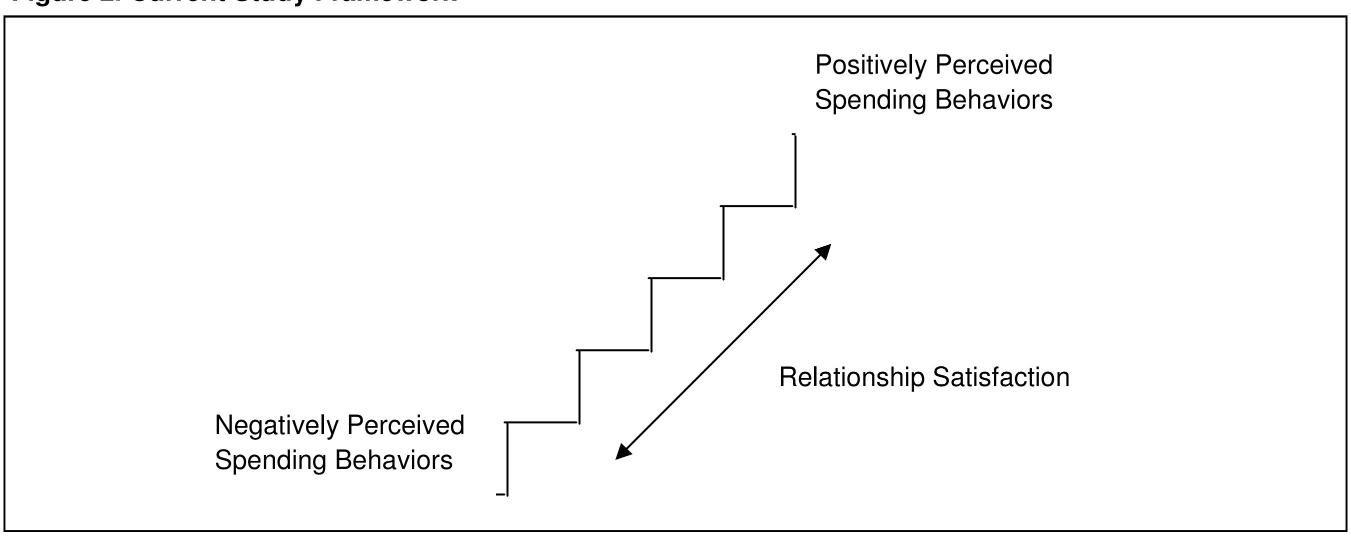
**Figure 1. Social Exchange Framework**




how these perceptions influence relationship satisfaction (see Figure 2). For example, assume an individual who shares similar interests and enjoys the company of his or her partner perceives these as great rewards leading to relationship satisfaction. If this same individual perceives the only cost to be joint spending behaviors, the individual will likely weigh the two rewards (e.g., interests and enjoyable company) higher on the staircase outweighing the one cost (e.g., joint spending behaviors), making the relationship profitable and worth pursuing. Individuals will continuously reevaluate the perceived rewards and costs associated with transactions and base their behaviors on opportunities with the greatest potential for profit (White & Klein, 2002). In other words, individuals will likely leave relationships that are unsatisfying (i.e., costs exceed rewards). It is important to note that individuals may perceive different costs and rewards in the same transaction (White & Klein, 2002), but regardless of individual perceptions, if financial behaviors are costly, this might be the impetus to terminate a relationship.

As suggested above, people have generally desired high relationship satisfaction and high benefits relative to costs. Many factors have influenced a cost-benefit analysis. For example, a person's demographic and socioeconomic profile, psychosocial characteristics, and stressors could have all played important roles in shaping perceptions. Studies of self-assessed relationship satisfaction should have accounted for these intervening variables. Assuming that intervening factors have been controlled, it is reason-

**Figure 2. Current Study Framework**



able to then account for perceived personal, partner, and joint spending behaviors as factors that might be associated with relationship satisfaction. Based on the review of literature, as framed by the social exchange theoretical model, it could be hypothesized that negative spending behaviors can be perceived as costs in a relationship. Although there was evidence to support this hypothesis in the literature, much of the early work in the field was conducted using relatively small qualitative samples. Further, nearly all of the data for previous studies were obtained in an economic environment that differed from the situation today. As such, there was a need to test the hypothesis using data from recent quantitative surveys. The primary research question to be addressed in the present study was whether perceived personal, partner, and joint spending behaviors influence relationship satisfaction when controlling for demographic and socioeconomic factors, psychosocial constructs, and financial stressors.

## Methodology

The present study utilized data from a survey administered to a sample of convenience that consisted of individuals who live in several communities within a mid-western state. The data file consisted of married and single employed individuals. Names included in the mailing list were obtained from employment directories from several for-profit and non-profit organizations that included staff, but not faculty, from a university. The primary purpose of the present study was to examine the interrelationships between relationship satisfaction and perceived personal, partner, and joint spending behaviors while controlling for intervening variables. Therefore, the survey assessed relationship satisfaction and personal, partner, and joint spending behaviors, along with the controlling variables—demographic characteristics, psychosocial constructs, and financial stressors.

### *Sample Selection*

A survey method was used to gather data for the current study. A total of 1,318 surveys were mailed to those in the sample; 500 hundred surveys were returned as useable, 36 were returned as undeliverable, 3 had missing data, and 16 were not opened as they arrived after initial analysis had begun. The overall response rate for the current study was 39.6% after accounting for undeliverable, missing data, or surveys received after data analysis began. Because the purpose of the present study was to examine factors that influenced relationship satisfaction, participants were limited to those who indicated being married or "involved in a relationship." This delimitation resulted in a sample consisting of 347 respondents (69% of useable questionnaires received) of which 37 were single but in a significant relationship (e.g., cohabitating) and 310 were married or remarried.

### *Sample Characteristics*

In general, the final sample used in the current study represented the communities from which data were collected; however, the sample differed in several respects when compared to national averages. The average respondent in the current study was 45 years of age, married, and employed full time. According to the 2000 Census Bureau, the population of the United States is comprised of 51% females and 49% males; the current sample over-represented women respondents with a composition of 72% ($n = 250$) females. Because the survey asked about both the respondent and his/her partner, it was possible to obtain demographic information on a respondent's partner. Respondents' partners were slightly older than the respondents ($M = 46$ years of age compared to $M = 45$ years of age). A higher percentage ($n = 309$, 89%) of participants were employed on a full time basis, whereas fewer partners were employed on a full time basis ($n = 222$, 64%). The sample was well educated. Over 56% ($n = 194$) of the respondents reported having an educational level of a bachelor's degree or higher. The average and median household income fell in a range of $50,001 to $60,000, which was higher than the reported national median of $41,994 in the 2000 Census. The mean number of children living in each household was one. Approximately 89% ($n = 309$) of the respondents indicated owning their own home, whereas the national home ownership rate was only 66% in 2000. Non-Hispanic Whites comprised 95% ($n = 330$) of the sample.

### *Outcome Variable*

Relationship satisfaction, as measured by the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) (Hendrick, 1988), was the outcome variable for the current study. The RAS was designed to be a short measure of relationship satisfaction for married couples, couples living together, dating couples, and gay or lesbian couples. The RAS is a seven-item Likert-type scale that measures relationship dimensions such as love, problems, and expectations. Item scores of 1 indicate low relationship satisfaction, whereas a score of 5 indicates high relationship satisfaction. Overall, scores for the seven-item RAS can range from 7 to 35.

The RAS was found to have an adequate level of internal consistency with an alpha, as reported in the literature, of .86 and .94 in the present study. The concurrent validity of the scale is well established. The scale correlates at the .80 level with the well-known Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Hendrick, 1988). In the present study, the overall mean score on the RAS was 28.96 with a standard deviation of 5.75.

### *Independent Variables*

A total of 15 independent variables were included in the data analysis, 10 of which were demographic variables used as intervening factors. Age and number of children in the household were measured at the interval level. Males, those employed full time, those with partners employed full time, non-Hispanic Whites, those with an attained educational level of a bachelor's degree or higher, and home owners were coded 1 and 0 otherwise. Household income was measured using 10 income bracket levels (less than $20,000, $20,001-$30,000, $30,001-$40,000, $40,001-$50,000, $50,001-$60,000, $60,001-$70,000, $70,001-$80,000, $80,001-$90,000, $90,001-$100,000, or more than $100,000). One computed variable, age difference, was calculated by subtracting a respondent's partner's age from the current age of the respondent.

Self-esteem was used in the current study as a factor that may influence a respondent's relationship satisfaction. Self-esteem was measured using a 10-item summated scale. The items were based on a scale that was originally developed by Rosenberg in 1965 and later revised by Didato in 2003. Similar scales have shown high levels of reliability and validity in previous studies. The scale's reliability in the current study was .65. A four-point Likert-type coding system was used: 1 = "not at all," 2 = "somewhat," 3 = "fairly well," and 4 = "very well." Scores for the self-esteem scale ranged from a low of 10 to a high of 40, with a mean and standard deviation of 30.6 and 3.5, respectively.

Respondents were also asked to describe financial stressors from the past year. Examples of possible stressors included having a serious medical bill, changing jobs, and moving from one residence to another. This variable was used to control for respondents who had experienced an extreme amount of financial stress. A list of 24 financial stressors was adapted from Joo (1998) and Joo and Grable (2004). Respondents in the current study reported experiencing less than 3.0 financial stressors, on average, with a standard deviation of approximately 2.0. These results matched previously reported stress levels in different samples and populations (Joo, 1998).

Finally, perceptions of financial spending behaviors were measured using three items, each of which measured spending behaviors exhibited by the respondent, the respondent's partner, and the respondent and his/her partner, respectively. The three items were adopted from the money subscale of the Scale of Marriage Problems (Swensen, Killough Nelson, Warner, & Dunlap, 1992). Perceived personal behavior was measured by asking whether "You spend large amounts of money without first consulting your partner." Perceived partner behavior was measured by asking whether "Your partner spends large amounts of money without first consulting with you." Lastly, perceived joint spending behavior was measured by asking whether "You, as a couple, have spent too much money and are still trying to get out of debt as a result." Scoring for the items was based on a dichotomous choice of yes (1) or no (0). Responses for each of these items and the other independent variables are shown in Table 1.

### *Data Analysis Method*

A hierarchical regression model, with the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) (Hendrick, 1988) used as the outcome variable, was used to determine if relationship satisfaction was impacted by perceived personal, partner, and joint financial spending behaviors. Data were analyzed using SPSS 15.0 for Windows. To account for possible multicollinearity within the data, variables were analyzed using correlations and collinearity diagnostics within SPSS prior to running the regression. No collinearity issues were noted.

## Results

Prior to conducting the regression analysis, a test was carried out to confirm the way in which those who were in a significant relationship were conceptualized. Specifically, literature existed to suggest that differences in relationship satisfaction between cohabitating and married couples might exist (c.f., Waite & Gallagher, 2000). If true, findings from this and similar studies that group married and non-married couples together might miss important within group variations in the way those involved in a significant relationship handle money issues. A $t$ test was used to test this possibility. Mean scores on the RAS were compared between married and all other respondents. Those who were married scored slightly higher than those who were not married but involved in a significant relationship ($M = 29.20$ and $M = 28.31$, respectively); however, the difference was not statistically significant [$t(347) = -.87$, $p = .38$]. This result was interpreted to mean that the respondents were similar in terms of

**Table 1. Variable Responses**

| Variables responses and characteristics | *M* (*SD*) |
|---|---|
| Age | 44.51 (10.54) |
| Gender (1 = male) | .28 (.45) |
| Employment status (1 = employed full time) | .89 (.31) |
| Partner's employment status (1 = employed full time) | .64 (.48) |
| Number of children in household | 1.08 (1.19) |
| Race/ethnic background (1 = non-Hispanic White) | .95 (.23) |
| Educational status (1 = bachelor's degree or higher) | .57 (.50) |
| Home ownership (1 = own house) | .89 (.31) |
| Household income | 5.65 (2.34) |
| Less than $20,000 (%) | 2.5 |
| $20,001 - $30,000 (%) | 7.4 |
| $30,001 - $40,000 (%) | 8.8 |
| $40,001 - $50,000 (%) | 15.2 |
| $50,001 - $60,000 (%) | 15.0 |
| $60,001 - $70,000 (%) | 15.7 |
| $70,001 - $80,000 (%) | 14.0 |
| $80,001 - $90,000 (%) | 8.3 |
| $90,001 - $100,000 (%) | 4.9 |
| More than $100,000 (%) | 8.3 |
| Age – partner's age | -1.13 (4.52) |
| Self-esteem | 30.65 (3.53) |
| Financial stressors | 2.35 (1.71) |
| You spend large amounts of money without first consulting your partner. | .05 (.21) |
| Your partner spends large amounts of money without first consulting with you. | .10 (.30) |
| You, as a couple, have spent too much money and are still trying to get out of debt as a result. | .28 (.45) |

relationship satisfaction regardless of the way in which they defined their couple relationship (i.e., married respondents were similar to those in a cohabitating relationship and those involved in other non-married relationships).

The *t* test was followed by an assessment of zero-order correlations (see the second column of Table 2) between the outcome variable (i.e., relationship satisfaction) and the independent variables. Five independent variables were positively significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction. Educational level and age difference were significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction. Those with a higher attained level of education were more satisfied with their relationship ($r = 0.11$, $p < .05$), and respondents with younger partners ($r = 0.12$, $p < .05$) were more satisfied than others. Self-esteem was also positively correlated with relationship satisfaction ($r = 0.13$, $p < .05$), whereas financial stressors were found to be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction ($r = -0.12$) at the .05 level. The financial stressor finding was interpreted to mean that those who were experiencing more financial stress tended to be less satisfied with their relationship. Only one of the three spending behavior variables was significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction. This spending behavior variable was the item used to measure the perception of a partner's financial behavior – "Your partner spends large amounts of money without first consulting with you." The association with relationship satisfaction was negative ($r = -0.39$) at the .001 level; however, neither perceived personal or joint behaviors were found to be significantly correlated with relationship satisfaction.

Based on this initial analysis, the variables were combined into six categories and entered as blocks into the regression. The ordering of the blocks was based on the desire to control for demographic factors, self-esteem, and financial stressors prior to testing the effect of personal, partner, and joint spending behaviors. The block entry procedure was made in the following sequence: Block 1: demographic factors, Block 2: self-esteem, Block 3: financial stressors, Block 4: perceived personal spending behavior, Block 5: perceived partner spending behavior, and Block 6: perceived joint spending behavior. Table 2 shows the incremental $R^2$ and $F$ changes for the blocks. The following discussion reviews the results of the block tests.

### *Regression Results*

The first three blocks in the regression analysis were used to control for intervening factors such as age, gender, household income, self-esteem, and financial stressors. Perceived personal spending behavior was then entered into the regression. This was followed by perceived partners' spending behavior. Perceived joint spending behavior was entered as the final block.

Block 1 consisted of demographic variables. The combination of the variables in this block accounted for 2% of

**Table 2. Regression Results of the Factors Influencing Relationship Satisfaction**

| Independent variables | Zero-order correlations | $R^2$ change | $F$ change | Block 1 β | Block 2 β | Block 3 β | Block 4 β | Block 5 β | Block 6 β |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Block 1 | | .020 | .703 | | | | | | |
| Age | .03 | | | -.03 | -.05 | -.06 | -.06 | -.06 | -.06 |
| Gender (1 = male) | .04 | | | .00 | .01 | .01 | .02 | .00 | .00 |
| Employment status (1 = employed full time) | -.04 | | | -.04 | -.05 | -.04 | -.04 | -.01 | -.02 |
| Partner's employment status (1 = employed full time) | -.04 | | | .02 | .03 | .03 | .04 | .02 | .02 |
| Number of children in household | -.01 | | | -.01 | .00 | -.00 | -.00 | -.00 | -.01 |
| Race/ethnic background (1 = non-Hispanic White) | .04 | | | .03 | .05 | .04 | .04 | .03 | .02 |
| Educational status (1 = bachelor's degree or higher) | .11* | | | .08 | .10 | .09 | .09 | .06 | .07 |
| Home ownership (1 = own house) | .03 | | | .11 | .11 | .10 | .09 | .09 | .09 |
| Household income | -.05 | | | -.04 | -.05 | -.07 | -.07 | -.07 | -.07 |
| Age – partner's age | .12* | | | .06 | .06 | .06 | .06 | .08 | .08 |
| Block 2 | | .028 | 9.849** | | | | | | |
| Self-esteem scale | .13* | | | | .17** | .17** | .17** | .15** | .16** |
| Block 3 | | .025 | 8.862** | | | | | | |
| Financial stressors | -.12* | | | | | -.16** | -.16** | -.13** | -.15** |
| Block 4 | | .001 | .491 | | | | | | |
| You spend large amounts of money without first consulting your partner. | -.05 | | | | | | -.04 | -.02 | -.02 |
| Block 5 | | .079 | 30.993*** | | | | | | |
| Your partner spends large amounts of money without first consulting with you. | -.39*** | | | | | | | -.29*** | -.29*** |
| Block 6 | | .003 | 1.350 | | | | | | |
| You, as a couple, have spent too much money and are still trying to get out of debt as a result. | -.08 | | | | | | | | .06 |

*Note*. $F(15, 332) = 4.106$; overall $R^2 = .156$.
$^*p < .05$. $^{**}p < .01$. $^{***}p < .001$.

explained variance in relationship satisfaction. None of the variables were significantly related to relationship satisfaction even though educational level and difference in partner's ages were initially found to be correlated with relationship satisfaction.

Block 2 accounted for self-esteem. Self-esteem explained approximately 3% of the variance in reported relationship satisfaction. Self-esteem was found to be positively associated with relationship satisfaction in Block 2 (b = .17, $p < .01$), as well as in the final regression (b = .16, $p < .01$).

Block 3 accounted for financial stressors. Nearly 3% of the variance in relationship satisfaction was due to financial stressors. Financial stressors were found to be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction in Block 3 (b = -.16, $p < .01$). The negative relationship was also noted in the final regression (b = -.15, $p < .01$).

Block 4 was used to account for perceived personal spending behavior using the following item: "You spend large amounts of money without first consulting your partner." Perceived personal behavior was not significantly related to relationship satisfaction, and the variable accounted for less than 1% of explained variance in the regression.

Block 5 measured perceived partners' spending behavior by assessing whether or not "Your partner spends large amounts of money without first consulting with you." Perceived partner spending was the most significant predictor of relationship satisfaction, accounting for approximately 8% of total explained variance in relationship satisfaction (b = -.29, $p < .001$). The strength of this finding remained consistent in the last regression (b = -.29, $p < .001$).

Block 6, the final block of the hierarchical regression, accounted for perceived spending behavior engaged in by both partners as a couple. Joint behavior was measured with the following item: "You, as a couple, have spent too much money and are still trying to get out of debt as a result." Perceived joint behavior was not associated with relationship satisfaction and the variable accounted for less than 1% of variance in relationship satisfaction scores.

## Discussion

The findings from the present study suggest that a respondent's perception of his or her partner's spending behaviors, but not the perception of personal or joint behaviors, has the most profound influence on relationship satisfaction. Specifically, those who perceived their partner's behaviors negatively were more likely to exhibit low relationship satisfaction. A respondent's reported relationship satisfaction was not influenced by his or her own perceived spending behaviors or joint behaviors. These results support the research hypothesis as described in Social Exchange Theory. Basically, it appears that individuals who are in a committed relationship are, just as in other areas of their life, motivated by self-interest. Essentially, people seek individual benefits and avoid punishments or costs. Therefore, individuals tend to be influenced more by their perceptions of other's behaviors (Ingoldsby et al., 2004; White & Klein, 2002). In the present study, the perceived negative spending behaviors of the partner were seen as a cost to respondents and were thus related to lower relationship satisfaction.

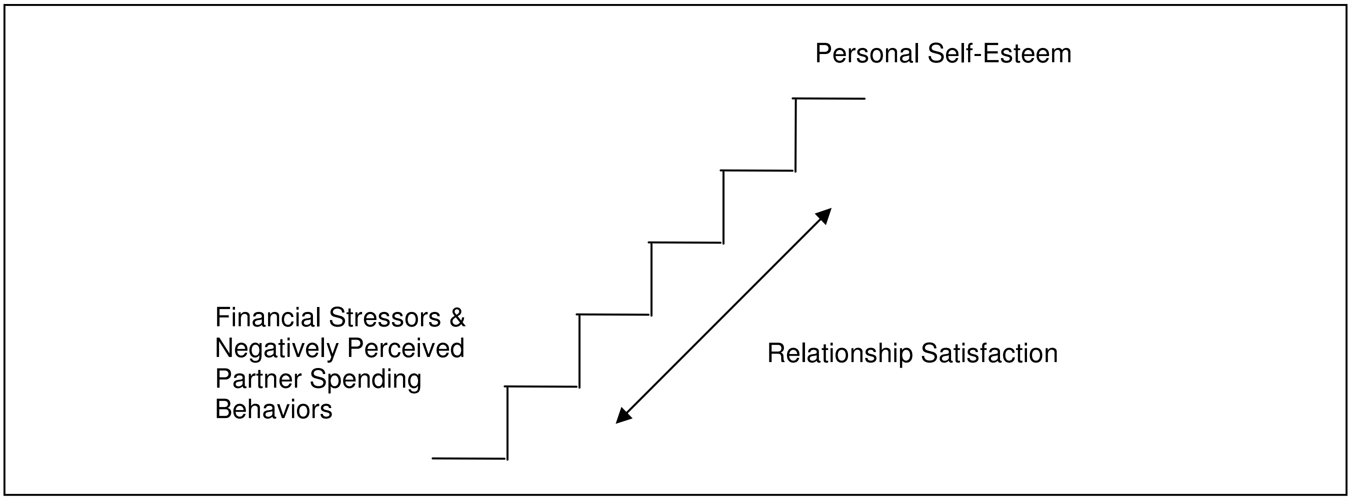
As shown in the regression analysis, the association between perceived partner spending and self-reported relationship satisfaction was negative, indicating that as a partner spent more money without consultation, the respondent's satisfaction decreased. Other important determinants of relationship satisfaction included self-esteem and financial stressors. The associations found in the current study concur with findings generally reported in the literature. For example, it is often assumed that couples who maintain high self-esteem levels and validate each other's feelings report fewer relationship problems (Kemp, 1974), which should enhance relationship satisfaction. Results from the current study confirm this assumption. Further, tensions over money have been used to predict reduced relationship satisfaction (Berry & Williams, 1987). Tensions over money behaviors have also been used to predict divorce (Amato & Rogers, 1997) and decreased quality of family interactions (Cutrona et al., 2003). In the current study, those with high financial stress reported overall lower levels of relationship satisfaction.

Overall, the final block, which included all of the independent variables, accounted for approximately 16% of the total variance in relationship satisfaction. Nearly half of this impact was accounted for by perceived partner financial behaviors. This is a significant finding as it means that a large proportion of reported relationship satisfaction can be determined by how a person perceives his or her partner's financial spending behavior.

Figure 3 illustrates how the factors used in the current study were found to influence relationship satisfaction. As illustrated, the more one's partner spends money without consultation, the lower the relationship satisfaction level. Self-esteem is shown to a have a positive influence on satisfaction, whereas financial stressors are negatively associated with relationship satisfaction.

MFTs and financial counselors and planners are driven by ethical and practice management standards that require actions to be taken in the best interests of clients. Fulfilling this directive can sometimes be difficult if the professional service provider is not able to identify or work with an underlying cause of a client's distress. For example, financial counselors and planners are able to assist clients with financial matters but may lack skills in assisting couples

**Figure 3. Final Factors Influencing Relationship Satisfaction**




with relational issues. MFTs are able to help clients with relationship issues but may not have the necessary skills to assist with financial management matters. Due to the large number of couples who struggle with some financial issue throughout their relationship (Aniol & Snyder, 1997; Cano et al., 2002; Markman et al. 2004), it is surprising that more MFTs and financial counselors and planners are not equipped to provide some form of *financial therapy*, which is a term proposed in the present study to define the integration of financial counseling with marriage and family therapy that focuses on the cause of destructive financial behaviors and finding solutions to the negative behaviors. Although scope of practice issues may and probably should limit most MFTs from providing financial counseling and most financial counselors and planners from providing relationship counseling, recognition of the issues can help professionals make appropriate referrals, as well as obtain additional training that may allow professionals from either domain to practice financial therapy with confidence.

## Practitioner Implications

Information gathered from the present study illustrates how relationship satisfaction and perceived spending behaviors are interrelated. Respondents' perceived personal spending was not found to influence relationship satisfaction. Likewise, how couples spent their money jointly was not associated with relationship satisfaction. The only significant spending behavior related to relationship satisfaction was a respondent's perception of their partner's behavior. This suggests that perceptions within a relationship truly matter. Respondents, on average, did not associate their own spending behaviors with the way they viewed their relationship. They also did not link perceived spending as a couple as a factor that influenced relationship satisfaction. It was only a respondent's perception that their partner was spending large amounts of money without appropriate consultation that influenced relationship satisfaction. Furthermore, high levels of financial stress were found to negatively influence relationship satisfaction. On the other hand, those who exhibited higher levels of self-esteem tended to be more satisfied than others.

These findings confirm what many MFTs already know. Financial behaviors, especially spending behaviors, and financial stressors can have an impact on relationship satisfaction. Regardless of where a client seeks help (e.g., marriage and family therapist, financial counselor, financial planner), the helping professional should possess skills necessary to work with couples who are struggling with relationship and financial issues or know of appropriate referral sources. Often couples will seek therapy for a communication or related issues when a fair amount of the relationship distress is actually a result of one or more negative financial behaviors. This might create concern for MFTs who are not trained in financial counseling or planning. On the other hand, because few financial counselors and planners are trained in therapy, they may become uncomfortable when relationship problems become apparent while providing financial services to couples. Mellan (2004) noted, "The line between planning and therapy is drawn in a slightly different place for everyone" (p. 68). It is important for therapists and financial counselors and planners to evaluate their own professional boundaries and have a list of referrals for clients who present issues beyond their ethical boundaries.

Findings from the present study suggest that there are precautionary steps that couples can take prior to becoming involved in a serious relationship, such as cohabitation or marriage. For instance, prior to becoming involved in a relationship, couples should review their partner's spending and other financial behaviors to ensure that the partner exhibits behaviors that are both appropriate and in-line with one's own approach to managing finances. Couples should consider developing a joint financial budget and engage in ongoing consultations with each other prior to making any significant purchase. If financial behaviors are not addressed prior to forming a relationship, the couple may experience decreased relationship satisfaction due to the couple's conflicting perceptions of financial behaviors.

Formal inventories can be used to assess money behaviors and relationship satisfaction of both partners as individuals and the two partners as a couple (e.g., Relationship Assessment Scale and the money subscale of the Scale of Marriage Problems). Quantitative measures give both professionals and clients knowledge about problematic issues before therapy or planning sessions even begin. Couples often have different perceptions of finances and the relationship in general, so it is helpful for both partners to complete a survey individually and then compare their similarities and differences with a therapist, counselor, or planner. This process requires patience and honesty from the couple.

## Conclusion

Although the current study aids in the progress of increased multidisciplinary research, it is important to note that additional research is needed to examine the complex interrelationships that likely exist between financial behaviors and relationship satisfaction. Given the exploratory nature of the current study, readers need to consider the generalizability of the sample. Because the sample was limited to survey respondents from one mid-western state, it is possible that findings may vary according to geographic location. Further, the sample used in the current study consisted of primarily well educated non-Hispanic White females with above-average median household incomes. Again, MFTs and financial counseling and planning practitioners who work with clients that differ significantly from this profile may find their experiences to be at variance from what is reported here. Further research should attempt to obtain responses from partners as well. Sampling both partners would allow for comparison analyses to better pinpoint perceptual differences between individuals in a relationship.

Despite these limitations, the findings from the current study show the importance of multidisciplinary research, especially when evaluating personal, partner, and joint spending behaviors and relationship satisfaction. Additional literature on the interrelationship between financial behaviors and relationship satisfaction will assist in the improvement of services for clients of MFTs, financial counselors, and financial planners.

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