

Partners' depressive symptoms moderate the effects of expressive suppression

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Abstract:

Suppressing emotional expressions can hide one's needs from relationship partners and thus prevent partners from providing support. Nevertheless, suppressing expressions may help people maintain more favorable evaluations of partners who are ultimately unsupportive because people may attribute a lack of support to partners being unaware of their needs. Thus, given that depressive symptoms reduce provisions of support, people with partners experiencing depressive symptoms may remain more satisfied to the extent that they previously suppressed emotional expressions. We tested these ideas in 1 experiment, 1 cross-sectional study, and 1 longitudinal study. In Study 1, participants imagined either expressing or suppressing their emotions, imagined their partner was either supportive or unsupportive to their needs, and reported their perceptions of their partner. In Studies 2 and 3, newlywed couples reported their depressive symptoms, their marital satisfaction, and the extent to which they suppressed their emotional expressions cross-sectionally (Study 2) or every year for 2 years (Study 3). Results revealed that people with unsupportive partners or partners high in depressive symptoms made more benevolent attributions for their partners' unsupportive behavior and remained more satisfied with their partners to the extent that they suppressed their emotional expressions; however, people with supportive partners or partners low in depressive symptoms became more dissatisfied with their partners to the extent that they suppressed their emotional expressions. These results highlight the benefits of dyadic theoretical perspectives by revealing that qualities of the partner moderate the effects of expressive suppression.

Keywords: expressive suppression | close relationships | satisfaction | depression | support

Article:

People often enter romantic relationships expecting that their partners will support them during times of need (Baker, McNulty, & VanderDrift, 2017; Feeney & Collins, 2015; Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014). One way that people motivate their partners to provide desired support is by expressing their emotions to those partners (Nesse & Ellsworth, 2009; for review, see Baker, McNulty, & Overall, 2014). For example, they may express anxiety to elicit reassurance, sadness to elicit comfort, or surprise or frustration to elicit advice. Indeed, emotional expressions can signal one's needs (Frijda, Kuipers, & Ter Schure, 1989) and partners tend to be more supportive when aware of those needs (Laurenceau, Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 1998; Srivastava, Tamir, McGonigal, John, & Gross, 2009). Consequently, expressive suppression—the process of minimizing emotional expressions (Gross, 1998)—prevents partners from providing necessary support (Gross & John, 2003; Laurenceau et al., 1998; Low, Overall,

Hammond, & Girme, 2017). For example, Low and colleagues (2017) demonstrated that people who suppressed their emotional expressions during discussions of their goals received less support from partners compared to people who did not suppress such expressions.

Suppressing emotional expressions can have additional costs. For example, people feel more inauthentic after suppressing emotional expressions around close others (Gross & John, 2003; Impett et al., 2012) and such feelings of inauthenticity can be distressing (Butler et al., 2003). Furthermore, given that people tend to feel closer to others after expressing personal information to them (for review, see Taylor & Altman, 1987) and when they believe others understand their authentic self (e.g., Katz & Joiner, 2002), suppressing emotional expressions should prevent the development of intimacy. Accordingly, a consistent body of research has demonstrated that people evaluate their relationships more negatively after suppressing their emotional expressions (Butler et al., 2003; Chervonsky & Hunt, 2017; Impett et al., 2012; Peters, Overall, & Jamieson, 2014; Righetti, Balliet, Visserman, & Hofmann, 2015; Srivastava et al., 2009). For example, a recent meta-analysis by Chervonsky and Hunt (2017) revealed that expressive suppression was associated with negative interpersonal outcomes, such as poorer liking, relationship satisfaction, and relationship quality.

Nevertheless, contextual theories of communication (e.g., Overall & McNulty, 2017; Zayas, Shoda, & Ayduk, 2002) suggest that the implications of interpersonal behavior depend on contextual factors. Consistent with these perspectives, previous research has demonstrated that expressive suppression can have notable benefits in certain contexts, such as when people are from highly interdependent cultures (Butler, Lee, & Gross, 2009) or are sacrificing for highly committed relationships (Le & Impett, 2013). The goal of the current research is to examine whether the implications of expressive suppression similarly depend on qualities of the partner.

Notably, expressive suppression may lead people to maintain more favorable evaluations of unsupportive partners. In particular, people often recognize that suppressing expressions hides their need for support (e.g., Suls, Green, Rose, Lounsbury, & Gordon, 1997). Consequently, if partners fail to provide support, people who first suppressed their expressions may attribute partners' subsequent lack of support to those partners being unaware of their needs rather than those partners being unwilling to provide support. In contrast, people who first expressed their emotions and thus signaled the need for support should discount that explanation (Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1973) and thus be more likely to conclude that their partners were intentionally unsupportive. Consistent with this idea, Lemay and Melville (2014) demonstrated that people with unsupportive partners were more likely to conclude that their partners were intentionally unsupportive to the extent that they disclosed their need for support.

Importantly, people's attributions for their partners' unsupportive behavior should affect how they evaluate their partners. In particular, people who believe their own actions caused their partners' undesirable behavior tend to remain more satisfied with those partners than do people who attribute their partners' undesirable behavior to dispositional qualities of the partner (e.g., Bradbury & Fincham, 1992; for review, see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). As such, people should remain more satisfied with their partners to the extent that they believe their partners' lack of support was the result of their own expressive suppression rather than their partners' intentional decision to not provide support. The attributional benefits of expressive suppression may not extend to partners' supportive behavior, though. Indeed, people tend to be less motivated to identify the causes of others' desirable, compared to undesirable, behavior (see Wong & Weiner, 1981), and attributions for desirable behaviors tend to be an unreliable predictor of changes in relationship satisfaction (see Bradbury & Fincham, 1990). In sum, people who suppress their

emotional expressions should attribute their partners' lack of support to their partners being unaware of their need for support and thus should remain more satisfied with their partners compared to people who express their emotions and thus signaled their need for support.

Accordingly, any factor that prevents partners from providing support should likewise determine the implications of expressive suppression. Depression should be a particularly relevant factor given that depressive symptoms have a profoundly harmful effect on the motivation to provide support (Kahn, Coyne, & Margolin, 1985; Sharabi, Delaney, & Knobloch, 2016; for review, see Segrin & Abramson, 1994). For example, Kahn and colleagues (1985) demonstrated that partners experiencing depressive symptoms were less nurturing, less affiliative, and more detached during laboratory problem-solving discussions than were partners not experiencing depressive symptoms. Similarly, in a qualitative analysis of experiences with depression, Sharabi and colleagues (2016) revealed that people reported that their depressive symptoms regularly prevented them from fulfilling their partners' needs for companionship, support, affection, romance, sex, and equal distribution of household tasks. Given that depressive symptoms prevent people from providing partners with adequate support, and given that people should maintain more positive evaluations of unsupportive partners to the extent that they previously suppressed their emotional expressions, expressive suppression should be associated with greater satisfaction among those with partners high in depressive symptoms.

We conducted three studies to test these predictions. Study 1 was an imagery experiment intended to provide internal validity. In this study, participants imagined either expressing or suppressing their emotions to their partners, imagined that their partner was either supportive or unsupportive, and then reported their attributions for their partners' behavior and how satisfied they would be with their partners. In this study, partners' support was manipulated rather than their depressive symptoms because participants might not recognize that depression inhibits support and ultimately, support was predicted to be the more proximal moderator. Study 2 was a cross-sectional study intended to examine whether partners' depressive symptoms similarly moderate the effects of expressive suppression, given that depressive symptoms tend to decrease support. In this study, newlywed couples reported their depressive symptoms, supportive behaviors, tendency to suppress their emotions, and marital satisfaction. Study 3 was a longitudinal study in which newlywed couples reported their depressive symptoms, marital satisfaction, and tendency to suppress their emotions three times over the course of 2 years.

Across these studies, we predicted that the implications of expressive suppression for attributions regarding partners' behavior and thus their own relationship satisfaction would depend on partners' depressive symptoms and thus the extent those partners are supportive. Specifically, we predicted that partners' depressive symptoms would be negatively associated with providing support. Further, we predicted that people with unsupportive partners, such as those high in depressive symptoms, would make more benevolent (i.e., more situational, less dispositional) attributions for their partners' lack of support, and thus remain more satisfied with those partners, to the extent that they first suppress emotional expressions. In contrast, we predicted that people would become more dissatisfied to the extent that they first suppressed emotional expressions toward partners who are supportive, such as those low in depressive symptoms, given that expressive suppression tends to be distressing and decreases intimacy.

Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to provide causal evidence that the implications of initial expressive suppression for relationship satisfaction depend on partners' support after expressive suppression occurs. Further, we examined whether partner attributions mediate this effect.

Method

Participants. Participants were 100 individuals who were recruited using the Mechanical Turk service on amazon.com (MTurk). Two participants were excluded from analyses because they failed attention checks. The remaining 98 participants (41 men, 57 women) had a mean age of 32.67 years ($SD = 10.81$). The majority of participants identified as White or Caucasian ($n = 73$; 75%), heterosexual ($n = 89$; 91%), and were either married ($n = 46$; 47%) or in an exclusive relationship ($n = 39$; 40%) for an average of 83.10 ($SD = 117.23$) months. More detailed information about the sample can be found in the online supplemental material.

Procedure. After providing informed consent, participants imagined they had a terrible day that was spent away from their partner; to ensure that participants thought about this scenario, they described three things that could have caused their terrible day. Participants then imagined meeting their partners; those randomly assigned to the emotional expression condition imagined describing their day to their partners “in an emotionally expressive manner” and those randomly assigned to the expressive suppression condition imagined describing their day to their partners but held “back any emotions that [they were] experiencing.” To ensure that participants thought about this scenario, they described how they would communicate this to their partners. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of two additional conditions; those in the supportive condition imagined their partners were supportive; those in the unsupportive condition imagined their partners failed to support them. To ensure participants thought about this scenario, participants described how their partners would respond. Finally, participants completed the following measures and were debriefed. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Measures

Partner attributions. Participants' attributions for their partners' behavior were assessed with two items (“the amount of support my partner provided was due to the type of person he/she is” and “the amount of support my partner provided was due to my behavior”) modeled after the Relationships Attribution Measure (Fincham & Bradbury, 1992), using a 7-point Likert response scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Given the two items were negatively associated with one another, $r = .52$, $p = .01$, the second item was reversed, and the items were summed ($M = 4.94$, $SD = 1.21$) such that higher scores indicated that participants attributed their partners' behavior to more dispositional qualities of those partners than themselves.

Relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was assessed with a modified Quality Marriage Index (QMI; Norton, 1983) that asked participants six items that assessed their relationship satisfaction if the imagined scenario had occurred (e.g., “My relationship with my partner makes me happy”). Five items ask participants to respond according to a 7-point scale, whereas one item asks participants to respond according to a 10-point scale. All items were summed ($M = 35.23$, $SD = 10.85$). Internal consistency was high. (coefficient alpha was .97.)

Manipulation checks. Participants responded to one item assessing the effectiveness of the expressive suppression manipulation (i.e., “In this imagined situation, how much did you convey to your partner that you wanted or needed support?”) and one item for the support manipulation (i.e., “In this imagined situation, how responsive to your needs do you think your partner was?”), using a 7-point Likert response scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very).

Results

Confirming the effectiveness of the manipulations, those in the emotional expression condition imagined conveying a greater need for support than those in the expressive suppression condition, $t(96) = 7.46, p = .01, d = 1.50$, and those in the supportive condition imagined their partners were more responsive to their needs than did those in the unsupportive condition, $t(96) = 2.02, p = .05, d = 0.41$. To examine whether partners’ support moderates the association between actors’ expressive suppression and actors’ relationship satisfaction, we regressed satisfaction scores onto a dummy-code for the expressive suppression conditions (0 expressed emotions, 1 suppressed expressions), the partners’ support conditions (0 unsupportive, 1 supportive), and the Expressive Suppression Partners’ Support interaction. Results are presented in the top section of Table 1. As indicated there, the Expressive Suppression Partners’ Support interaction significantly predicted relationship satisfaction (see Panel A of Figure 1). Tests of the simple slopes that followed the recommendations of Cohen, Cohen, West, and Aiken (2003) revealed that, among those in the supportive partner condition, those also in the expressive suppression condition were less satisfied than were those in the emotional expression condition, $b = 5.92, SE = 2.71$,

Table 1

Effects of Expressive Suppression, Partners’ Support, and Their Interaction on Relationship Satisfaction and Attributions in Study 1

Predictor	β	t	p	r	95% CI
Satisfaction					
Expressive suppression	9.71	3.41	<.01	.33	[4.05, 15.37]
Partners’ support	15.27	5.44	<.01	.49	[9.69, 20.84]
Expressive Suppression ✖ Partners’ Support	-15.63	-3.97	<.01	.38	[-23.44, -7.81]
Attributions					
Expressive suppression	-.95	-2.73	<.01	.27	[-1.64, -.26]
Partners’ support	-.76	-2.20	.03	.22	[-1.44, -.07]
Expressive Suppression ✖ Partners’ Support	.87	1.81	.07	.18	[-.09, 1.82]

Note. 95% = CI 95% confidence interval. $df = 94$.

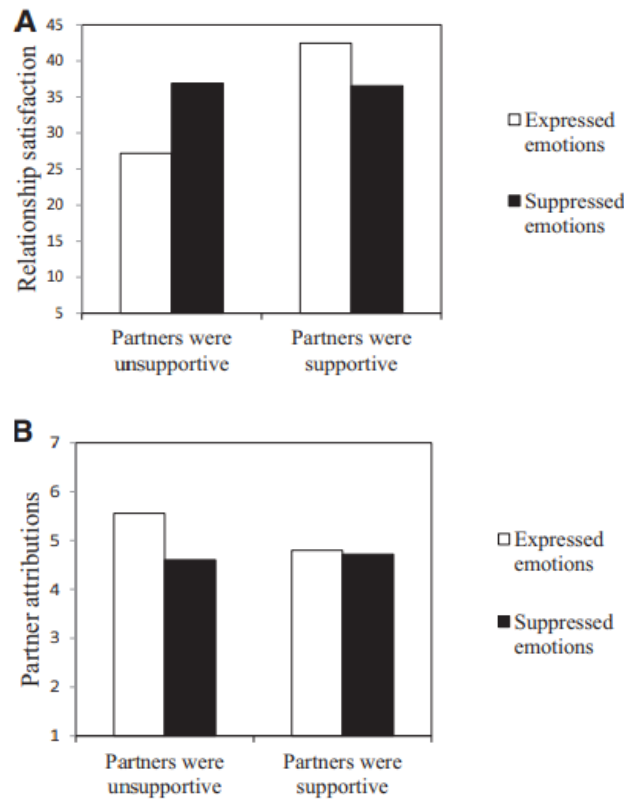


Figure 1. Interactive effects of expressive suppression and partners' support on relationship satisfaction and partner attribution scores in Study 1.

$t(94) = 2.18, p = .03, r = .33$, but among those in the unsupportive partner condition, those also in the expressive suppression condition were more satisfied than were those in the emotional expression condition, $b = 9.71, SE = 2.85, t(94) = 3.41, p = .01, r = .22$.

Next, we tested whether the attributions made for partners' behavior accounted for these differences in satisfaction. To do so, we conducted two additional sets of analyses to compute asymmetric confidence intervals for the distribution of the product of the mediated effect following the recommendations of MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams, and Lockwood (2007). This approach was selected because it tends to have greater power detecting valid indirect effects than do other approaches (e.g., Monte Carlo simulations, bootstrap resampling; see MacKinnon, Lockwood, & Williams, 2004). First, we tested whether the interaction of the two manipulations predicted participants' attributions by regressing partner attribution scores onto the expressive suppression conditions dummy-code, partners' support conditions dummy-code, and the Expressive Suppression Partners' Support interaction. The Expressive Suppression Partners' Support interaction was marginally associated with attributions (see bottom section of Table 1 and Panel B of Figure 1). Those in the expressive suppression condition attributed their partners' unsupportive behavior less to those partners' dispositional qualities than did those in the emotional expression condition, $b = 0.95, SE = 0.35, t(94) = 2.73, p = .01, r = .27$, but those in the expressive suppression and expression conditions did not differ in their attributions for their partners' supportive behavior, $b = 0.08, SE = 0.33, t(94) = 0.25, p = .81, r = .03$.

Second, we tested whether such attributions predicted relationship satisfaction, controlling for both manipulations and their interaction. Given that the effect of expressive suppression on partner attributions emerged only among those who imagined their partners were

unsupportive, we only examined the effect of attributions for satisfaction among those in the unsupportive conditions by regressing relationship satisfaction scores onto a dummy-code for the partners' support conditions, mean-centered partner attribution scores, the Partner Attributions Partners' Support interaction, a dummy-code for the expressive suppression conditions, and the Expressive Suppression Partners' Support interaction. In this model, the mean-centered partner attribution scores represent the simple effect of such attributions for satisfaction among those in the unsupportive conditions. Consistent with the second criterion necessary for establishing mediation, partner attributions were negatively associated with relationship satisfaction among those in the unsupportive conditions, $b = 3.31$, $SE = 1.46$, $t(92) = 2.26$, $p = .03$, $r = .23$. Finally, we calculated an estimate of the mediated effect, $B = 3.14$, and computed the 95% confidence intervals (0.32: 7.28) that indicated that the mediated effect was significant. Importantly, we were unable to find evidence for alternative mediational models (i.e., relationship satisfaction as a mediator), nor were attributions a significant mediator for those in the supportive conditions (full details can be found in the online supplemental material).

Discussion

Study 1 provides initial experimental evidence for our predictions. In particular, people made more benevolent attributions for their partners' unsupportive behavior and remained more satisfied with those partners when they first imagined suppressing rather than expressing their emotions to their partners. In contrast, people were more satisfied with partners who were supportive when they first imagined expressing rather than suppressing their emotions. Nevertheless, Study 1 is limited in two important ways. First, participants were asked to imagine a hypothetical event and their predicted responses might differ from their actual responses. As such, Study 2 was an ecologically valid study that examined naturally occurring expressive suppression. Second, although Study 1 demonstrated that people were more satisfied with unsupportive partners to the extent that they suppressed expressions, and previous research has revealed that depressed partners tend to be less supportive, this study nevertheless did not directly examine the role of partners' depressive symptoms. Doing so was the goal of Study 2.

Study 2

Method

Participants. Participants were 101 newlywed couples (93 heterosexual couples, seven lesbian couples, one gay couple) participating in an ongoing broader study of marriage. Participants were 32.35 years old ($SD = 8.71$) on average; the majority were White or Caucasian ($n = 129$; 64%), Christian ($n = 92$; 46%), and employed full time ($n = 141$; 70%). More detailed information about the sample can be found in the online supplemental material.

Procedure. After enrolling in the study, couples were emailed a link to the university's online participation site where they individually completed questionnaires assessing expressive suppression, depressive symptoms, provisions of support, and marital satisfaction. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Measures.

Depressive symptoms. Depressive symptoms were assessed using the Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression (CES-D) scale (Radloff, 1977). This measure requires individuals to report the frequency that they have experienced depressive symptoms (e.g., “I felt sad,” “I could not get going,”) over the past week, using a 4-point Likert response scale, ranging from 0 (rarely or none of the time) to 3 (most or all of the time). All items were summed ($M = 12.91$, $SD = 9.39$). Sixty-two (31%) participants were at risk for clinical depression (scores greater than 16). Internal consistency was high. (coefficient alpha was .90.)

Expressive suppression. The extent to which participants tend to suppress emotional expressions was assessed with the Courtauld Emotional Control Scale (for psychometric properties, see Watson & Greer, 1983), the most frequently used measure of expressive suppression (see Brandão, Tavares, Schulz, & Matos, 2016). This measure requires individuals to report agreement with 21 items that assess their typical responses to anger (e.g., “when I feel angry, I hide my annoyance”), anxiety (e.g., “when I feel worried, I refuse to say anything about it”), and sadness (e.g., “when I feel unhappy, I put on a bold face”) using a 4-point Likert response scale ranging from 1 (almost never) to 4 (almost always). All items were summed ($M = 49.37$, $SD = 10.40$). Internal consistency was high. (coefficient alpha was .91.)

Marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was assessed with the QMI (Norton, 1983; $M = 40.52$, $SD = 8.05$). Internal consistency was acceptable. (coefficient alpha was .96.)

Support. Five items assessed the extent to which participants support their partners (i.e., “How often do you console your partner?”, “How often do you encourage your partner?”, “How often do you provide suggestions to your partner?”, “How often do you offer to help your partner?”, “How often do you express love or affection to your partner?”) using a 7-point Likert response scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (frequently). All items were summed ($M = 30.66$, $SD = 4.45$). Internal consistency was high. (coefficient alpha was .84.)

Results

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations can be found in the online supplemental material. To examine whether partners’ depressive symptoms moderate the association between actors’ expressive suppression and actors’ marital satisfaction, we estimated the following two-level model using the HLM 6.08 computer program following the recommendations of Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006):

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{ij}(\text{Marital Satisfaction}) = & \beta_{0ij} + \beta_{1ij}(\text{Expressive Suppression}) \\ & + \beta_{2ij}(\text{Partners' Depressive Symptoms}) \\ & + \beta_{3ij}(\text{Expressive Suppression Partners' Depression}) + r_{ij} \quad (1) \end{aligned}$$

Such multilevel models control for the nonindependence of nested data in which individuals are nested within couples (see Raudenbush, & Bryk, 2002). A randomly varying intercept was specified in the second level of the model to control for couple-level variance in satisfaction. The primary results did not vary depending on whether spouses were treated as distinguishable by gender (excluding nonheterosexual couples) or indistinguishable, $\chi^2(3) = 5.21$, $p = .16$, thus analyses treated spouses as indistinguishable to maximize power (see Kenny et al., 2006).

Results are presented in the top section of Table 2. As indicated there, the Expressive Suppression Partners' Depression interaction significantly predicted satisfaction (see Figure 2). Consistent with predictions, tests of the simple slopes revealed that expressive suppression was negatively associated with marital satisfaction among people whose partners were one standard deviation below the mean on depressive symptoms, $b = 0.25$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(194) = 3.42$, $p = .01$, $r = .24$, but marginally positively associated with marital satisfaction among people whose partners were one standard deviation above the mean on depressive symptoms, $b = 0.15$, $SE = 0.08$, $t(194) = 1.89$, $p = .06$, $r = .13$. Notably, this interaction was not further moderated by participants' sex, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(190) = 1.58$, $p = .12$, $r = .11$, and remained significant when controlling for actors' own depressive symptoms and partners' expressive suppression, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(191) = 3.25$, $p = .01$, $r = .23$.

We then examined whether partners' support accounted for these effects of expressive suppression such that partners' depressive symptoms would predict less supportive behavior from those partners, which would interact with actors' expressive suppression to predict actors' satisfaction. To do so, we estimated the mediated effect in a manner similar to Study 1. First, we regressed partners' reports of their supportive behavior onto those partners' depressive symptoms, which indicated that partners with greater depressive symptoms reported providing less support, $b = 0.10$, $SE = 0.03$, $t(200) = 2.96$, $p = .01$, $r = .20$. Second, we examined whether partners' support similarly moderated the association between actors' expressive suppression and actors' satisfaction by regressing actors' marital satisfaction scores onto actors' mean-centered expressive suppression scores, partners' mean-centered support

Table 2

Effects of Expressive Suppression, Partners' Depressive Symptoms, Partners' Support, and Their Interactions on Relationship Satisfaction in Study 2

Predictor	β	t	p	r	95% CI
Satisfaction ^a					
Expressive suppression	-.04	-.94	.35	.07	[-.09, -.01]
Partners' support	-.20	-2.95	<.01	.21	[-.33, -.07]
Expressive Suppression X Partners' Support	.02	3.37	<.01	.24	[.01, .03]
Satisfaction ^b					
Expressive suppression	-.06	-1.16	.25	.08	[-.17, -.04]
Partners' support	-.17	-2.95	<.01	.19	[-.29, -.04]
Expressive Suppression Partners' Support	.02	2.73	<.01	.19	[.01, .03]
Expressive suppression	.08	.55	.59	.04	[-.22, .39]
Partners' support	-.03	-2.65	<.01	.19	[-.05, -.01]

Note. 95% CI = 95% confidence interval.

^a $df = 194$. ^b $df = 192$.

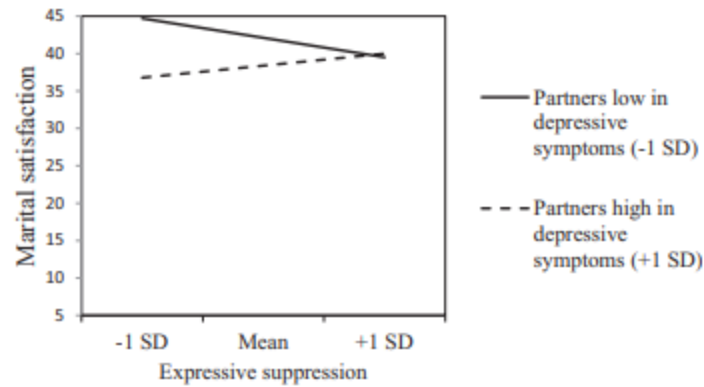


Figure 2. Interactive effects of expressive suppression and partners' depressive symptoms on marital satisfaction scores in Study 2.

scores, and the Expressive Suppression Partners' Support interaction, controlling for partners' mean-centered depressive symptom scores and the Expressive Suppression Partners' Depression interaction. Results indicated that the Expressive Suppression Partners' Support interaction was significantly associated with satisfaction (see bottom section of Table 2). Tests of the simple slopes revealed that expressive suppression was marginally positively associated with marital satisfaction among people whose partners were one standard deviation below the mean on support, $b = 0.16$, $SE = 0.10$, $t(194) = 1.66$, $p = .10$, $r = .12$, but negatively associated with marital satisfaction among people whose partners were one standard deviation above the mean on support, $b = 0.25$, $SE = 0.07$, $t(194) = 3.57$, $p = .01$, $r = .25$. Finally, we calculated an estimate of the mediated effect, $B = 3.00E-3$, and computed the 95% confidence intervals ($5.60E-4$: $6.44E-3$) that indicated that the mediated effect was significant. Specifically, partners' depressive symptoms predicted less supportive behavior from those partners, which interacted with actors' expressive suppression to predict actors' satisfaction. The online supplemental material contains supplemental results revealing that this mediational model fit the data better than alternative models and that the Expressive Suppression x Partners' Support interaction did not predict partners' satisfaction.

Discussion

Study 2 extends the results from Study 1 by revealing that partners' depressive symptoms moderate the association between expressive suppression and relationship satisfaction because such depressive symptoms are associated with less support. Specifically, expressive suppression was negatively associated with satisfaction among people whose partners were low in depressive symptoms but marginally positively associated with satisfaction among people whose partners were high in depressive symptoms. Nevertheless, although alternative mediational models did not reveal evidence inconsistent with our causal predictions, the cross-sectional nature of this study limits conclusions about the temporal association between these variables. Thus, we conducted Study 3 to provide stronger temporal evidence that expressive suppression and partners' depressive symptoms preceded changes in marital satisfaction.

Method

Participants. Participants were 120 newlywed couples (119 heterosexual couples, one lesbian couple) participating in a broader longitudinal study of marriage. Participants were 31.05 years old ($SD = 9.04$) on average; the majority were White or Caucasian ($n = 184$; 77%), Christian ($n = 137$; 58%), and employed full time ($n = 159$; 82%). More detailed information about the sample can be found in the online supplemental material.

Procedure. After enrolling in the study, couples were emailed a link to the university's online participation site where they individually completed questionnaires assessing expressive suppression, depressive symptoms, and marital satisfaction. At approximately 12-month intervals, couples were emailed a link to follow-up questionnaires. Analyses are based on up to three assessments. Support was not assessed in this study. All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Florida State University.

Measures.

Depressive symptoms. Depressive symptoms were assessed using the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961). The BDI is a 21-item, multiple-choice measure that asks participants to identify one of four statements that best describes the extent of their depressive symptoms (e.g., "I do not feel sad," "I feel sad," "I am sad all the time and I cannot snap out of it," "I am so sad or unhappy that I can't stand it") over the past week. Each item is rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 to 3, with higher scores indicating greater depressive symptoms. All items were summed (Time 1: $M = 6.76$, $SD = 6.89$; Time 2: $M = 8.81$, $SD = 9.17$; Time 3: $M = 7.95$, $SD = 8.77$). At baseline, 36 (16%) participants reported no depressive symptoms (BDI score of 0), 173 (76%) participants reported mild depressive symptoms (BDI scores between 1 and 16), 14 (6%) participants reported moderate depressive symptoms (BDI scores between 17 and 30), and four (2%) participants reported severe depressive symptoms (BDI scores greater than 30). Internal consistency was acceptable. (All coefficient alphas were above .86.)

Expressive suppression. Suppression was assessed with the Courtauld Emotional Control Scale (Time 1: $M = 46.83$, $SD = 11.04$; Time 2: $M = 47.52$, $SD = 9.51$; Time 3: $M = 48.05$, $SD = 10.48$). Internal consistency was high. (All coefficient alphas were above .90.)

Marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was assessed with the QMI (Time 1: $M = 41.94$, $SD = 4.67$; Time 2: $M = 38.88$, $SD = 7.98$; Time 3: $M = 37.90$, $SD = 8.75$). Internal consistency was acceptable. (All coefficient alphas were above .94.)

Results

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations can be found in the online supplemental material. To examine whether the partners' depressive symptoms moderate the association between actors' expressive suppression and changes in actors' marital satisfaction, we conducted multilevel lagged analyses using the MIXED procedure in SPSS 24 following the recommendations of Kenny et al. (2006) that estimated the following model:

$$\begin{aligned}
Y_{ijt+1} \text{ (Subsequent Marital Satisfaction)} &= \pi_{0ijt} + \pi_{1ijt}(\text{Time}) \\
&+ \pi_{2ijt}(\text{Marital Satisfaction}) + \pi_{3ijt}(\text{Expressive Suppression}) \\
&+ \pi_{4ijt}(\text{Partners' Depressive Symptoms}) \\
&+ \pi_{5ijt}(\text{Expressive Suppression Partners' Depression}) + e_{ijt}
\end{aligned}
\tag{2}$$

Such multilevel models control for the nonindependence of nested data in which individuals and time are crossed, and individuals are nested within couples. A randomly varying intercept was specified in the second level of the model to control for couple-level variance in satisfaction. The primary results did not vary depending on whether spouses were treated as distinguishable by gender (excluding nonheterosexual couples) or indistinguishable, $\chi^2(5) = 6.75$, $p = .24$, thus analyses treated spouses as indistinguishable to maximize power.

Results are presented in Table 3. As indicated, the Expressive Suppression Partners' Depression interaction was significantly associated with changes in satisfaction (see Figure 3). Tests of the simple slopes revealed that expressive suppression was negatively associated with changes in satisfaction among people whose partners were one standard deviation below the mean on depressive symptoms, $b = 0.15$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(35) = 2.84$, $p = .01$, $r = .43$, but positively associated with changes in satisfaction among people whose partners were one standard deviation above the mean on depressive symptoms, $b = 0.11$, $SE = 0.05$, $t(102) = 2.14$, $p = .04$, $r = .21$. Notably, this interaction was not further moderated by participants' sex, $b = 0.00$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(311) = 0.02$, $p = .98$, $r = .00$, and remained significant when controlling for actors' own depressive symptoms and partners' expressive suppression, $b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.01$, $t(76) = 3.53$, $p = .01$, $r = .38$. Finally, the online supplemental material contains supplemental results revealing that the Expressive Suppression Partners' Support interaction did not predict changes in partners' satisfaction.

General Discussion

Previous research suggests that suppressing emotional expressions can harm close relationships because it prevents partners

Table 3
Effects of Expressive Suppression, Partners' Depressive Symptoms, and Their Interaction on Changes in Marital Satisfaction in Study 3

Predictor	Next-assessment satisfaction				
	π	t	p	r	95% Ci
Time	.26	1.04	.81	.10	[-.24, .76]
Expressive suppression	-.01	-.31	.76	.04	[-.08, .06]
Partners' depression	.02	.39	.70	.04	[-.08, .06]
Expressive Suppression Partners' Depression	.01	3.19	<.01	.27	[.01, .02]
Satisfaction	.70	9.75	<.01	.61	[.56, .84]

Note. 95% CI = 95% confidence interval.

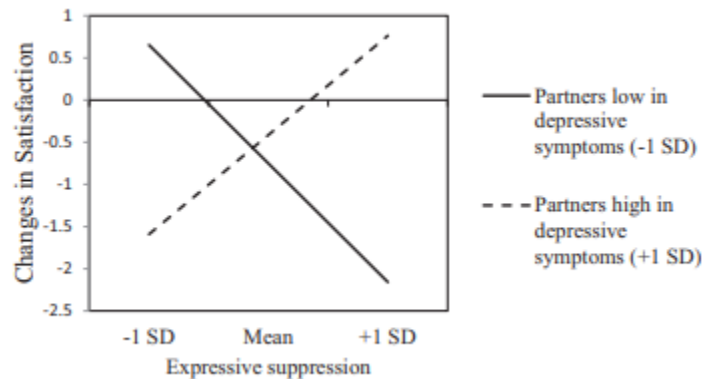


Figure 3. Interactive effects of expressive suppression and partners' depressive symptoms on changes in marital satisfaction scores in Study 3.

from recognizing the need for support (e.g., Gross & John, 2003; Laurenceau et al., 1998). However, for people whose partners are ultimately unsupportive to their needs, initially suppressing emotional expressions may allow them to make more benevolent attributions for their partners' lack of support and thus remain more satisfied with those partners than if they had expressed their emotions. Given that individuals experiencing depressive symptoms tend to provide their partners with less support (see Segrin & Abramson, 1994), we predicted that people with unsupportive partners, such as partners high in depressive symptoms, would make more benevolent attributions for their partners' subsequent unsupportive behavior and thus be more satisfied with those partners to the extent that they first suppressed emotional expressions. Results from one cross-sectional, one longitudinal, and one experimental study supported these ideas. More specifically, partners high in depressive symptoms were less supportive (Study 2), and participants made more benevolent attributions for their partners' unsupportive behavior (Study 1) and remained more satisfied with those partners (Studies 1, 2, and 3) to the extent that they first suppressed their emotional expressions.

Nevertheless, consistent with our predictions and previous research, expressive suppression was associated with decreased relationship satisfaction among those with supportive partners, such as partners low in depressive symptoms; indeed, the most satisfied individuals tended to be those who regularly expressed their emotions with partners who were subsequently supportive. However, we did not find evidence that attributions for partners' supportive behavior accounted for the consequences of expressive suppression among those with supportive partners. Previous research suggests two possible reasons why suppression may still have led to decreased relationship satisfaction among those with supportive partners. First, as previously described, suppressing emotional expressions can prevent partners from being aware of one's interpersonal needs (Frijda et al., 1989), thus preventing them from being supportive (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Srivastava et al., 2009). As such, it is possible that the declines in relationship satisfaction observed in Study 3 may be a result of those partners providing less support over time. Second, given that emotional self-disclosures tend to increase intimacy (Taylor & Altman, 1987) and thus feelings of satisfaction (Hunsley, Best, Lefebvre, & Vito, 2001) between partners, suppressing emotional expressions may have inhibited intimacy and thus decreased satisfaction with supportive partners in Studies 1–3. Future research would benefit by examining whether changes

in partners' actual support and/or intimacy mediate the association between expressive suppression and declines in satisfaction that emerged in these studies.

Implications and Future Directions

The current findings have important theoretical and practical implications. First, they highlight the necessity of considering contextual factors when examining the consequences of interpersonal behaviors. Although several theoretical perspectives (Overall & McNulty, 2017; Zayas et al., 2002) suggest that the implications of interpersonal behavior should be determined by qualities of the partner, only a handful of studies (e.g., Baker, Cobb, McNulty, Lambert, & Fincham, 2016; Baker & McNulty, 2015; McNulty & Russell, 2016) have examined this idea, and those studies examined the effects of interpersonal behavior for the partner rather than the actor. For example, Baker and McNulty (2015) demonstrated that confrontation increased the motivation to reduce problematic behavior among partners low in depressive symptoms but decreased motivation among partners high in depressive symptoms. What is particularly novel about the current findings is that they are the first to reveal that the effects of actors' behavior for actors' interpersonal evaluations depends on a specific quality of the partner—that is, how they respond to actors' behavior.

Second, these studies have preliminary implications for practitioners assisting clients whose partners are experiencing depressive symptoms. In particular, it is often challenging to be in a relationship with a partner experiencing depression, partly because depressive symptoms can prevent those partners from providing necessary support (e.g., Kahn et al., 1985; Segrin & Abramson, 1994). However, the current results also suggest it is even more distressing to express a need for support that goes unmet. Accordingly, clients with depressed partners may benefit from greater awareness about how depressive symptoms can prevent partners from providing support so those clients are better able to calibrate their emotional expressions to the extent of support that their partners are currently able to provide. Broadly consistent with this idea, McNulty (2016) recently demonstrated that people are happiest with their relationships when their relationship expectations match their partners' abilities to meet those expectations. Accordingly, people with depressed partners may benefit by seeking support from other important people in their lives, such as friends, family, coworkers, or neighbors until their partners are able to provide desired support (Keneski, Neff, & Loving, 2017; see Finkel et al., 2014).

Finally, these studies suggest additional avenues for future research, such as examining whether the motivation for expressive suppression further determines its consequences. For example, people who suppress emotional expressions because they want to test whether their partners will infer their needs without explicit guidance or who are simply unaware that they are suppressing expressions likely would not experience the attributional benefits observed in the current studies. In contrast, those who suppress their emotions because they do not want (a) their partners to feel obligated to provide support, (b) to make their partners feel guilty, or (c) to appear weak by expressing the need for support likely know they are not signaling their needs to their partners and thus would likely make the benevolent attributions for their partners' lack of support that were revealed in the current studies. The extent to which partners are able to provide support may also have consequences for actors' later emotional expressions. Indeed, people often suppress expressions of distress from partners who are facing their own difficulties to prevent those partners from feeling obligated to provide assistance (e.g., Suls et al., 1997). Thus, not only

might the extent of partners' support determine how people feel about their partners after expressing their emotions, it might also determine whether or not people express their emotions to those partners in the future. Although the current studies were unable to provide evidence for this possibility, future research would benefit from testing this idea.

Study Limitations

Several factors limit the conclusions that can be drawn from these results. First, the current studies only examined the effects of expressive suppression for relationship evaluations. Although expressive suppression may help people maintain favorable beliefs about unsupportive partners, it may still decrease intimacy and/or prevent such partners from recognizing the need for support, causing those partners to become even less supportive over time. Consequently, the benefits of maintaining favorable evaluations of a generally unsupportive partner may not outweigh the costs of failing to receive necessary support from that partner. Second, Study 2 revealed that the effects of expressive suppression on satisfaction were due to partners high in depressive symptoms providing less support. However, these results were based on partners' reports of their own provisions of support, which may be biased by depressive cognitions. A more objective measure of support would increase confidence in these results. Similarly, only Study 1 examined the role of attributions; future research would benefit from attempting to replicate the effects of benevolent attributions for interpersonal evaluations. Finally, although all three studies relied on community samples that were more variable in age than those of most psychological studies that rely on undergraduate students, the majority of participants were young adults. Similarly, although a modest number of participants in Studies 1 and 2 reported moderate or severe depressive symptoms, diagnosis of depression requires a clinical interview. As such, generalizations to older adults or to clinical samples should be made with caution.

Conclusion

Expressing emotions can motivate relationship partners to provide support. However, such expressions may unintentionally decrease satisfaction with partners if they fail to provide necessary support. Accordingly, the studies described here indicate that those with unsupportive partners, such as partners high in depressive symptoms, make more benevolent attributions for partners' subsequent unsupportive behavior, and remain more satisfied with their partners, to the extent that they first suppress emotional expressions. In contrast, those with supportive partners, such as partners low in depressive symptoms, become less satisfied with their partners to the extent that they first suppress their emotions. As such, theoretical descriptions of the interpersonal implications of expressive suppression may be most complete to the extent that they consider contextual factors, such as qualities of the partner that prevent needed support.

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