

Using the theory of planned behavior to predict constructive communication during relationship conflict

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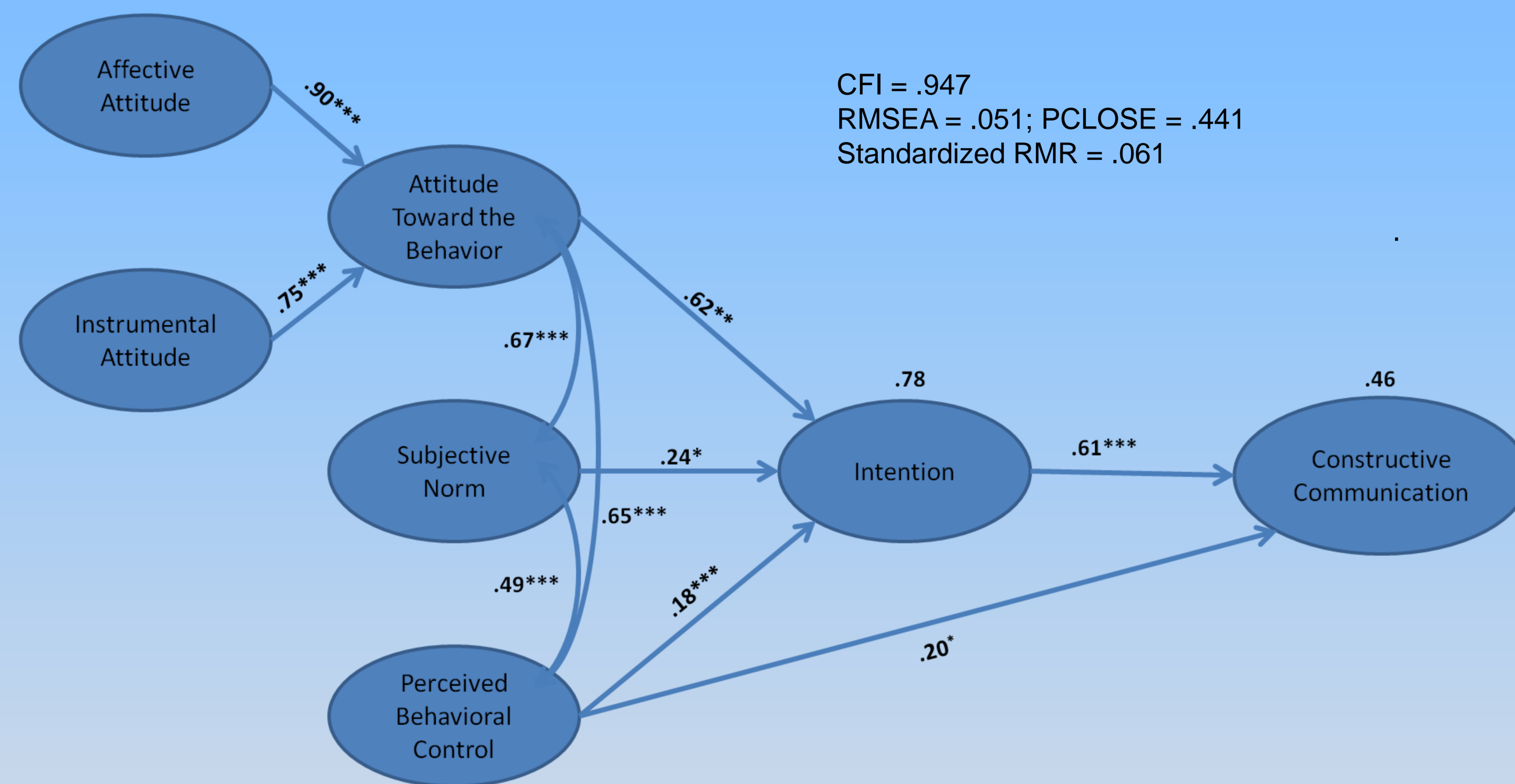
Research project "Development of a new model of communication during conflicts in close relationships"

Introduction

The theory of planned behavior, which emphasizes cognitive self-regulation as an important aspect of human behavior, is one of the most frequently used models in predicting human behavior. According to this theory, human behavior is guided by three types of considerations: *behavioral beliefs*, *normative beliefs* and *control beliefs* (see model below). Behavioral beliefs produce a favorable/unfavorable *attitude toward the behavior*, the result of normative beliefs is *subjective norm*, while control beliefs give rise to *perceived behavioral control*. When combined, these factors lead to the formation of a behavioral *intention*, which is usually the strongest predictor of actual behavior. However, this theory was not often considered to predict behaviors in close relationships. One of the main aspects of a healthy relationship is constructive communication, especially during conflicts. The ways in which couples resolve conflicts are predictive for divorce, and correlate with the satisfaction and quality of a relationship. Therefore, it is important to further investigate how to predict constructive communication during conflicts.

Aim

To examine whether constructive communication during conflicts in dating couples can be predicted by the constructs proposed by the theory of planned behavior.



Method

The sample consisted of 240 young adults currently in a relationship, aged between 18 and 30 years (50.4% female, 49.6% male).

Measures

1. The *Theory of planned behavior questionnaire*, constructed following Ajzen's (2006) instructions

1. Attitude Toward the Behavior, 4 items, $\alpha = .710$
2. Subjective Norm, 3 items, $\alpha = .858$
3. Perceived Behavioral Control, 3 items, $\alpha = .755$
4. Intention, 3 items, $\alpha = .857$

2. A month later the actual behavior during conflicts was assessed using the 7-item *Constructive Communication subscale* from the *Communication Patterns Questionnaire* (Christensen & Sullaway, 1984), $\alpha = .626$

Table 1 – Standardized Direct and Indirect Effects

	Attitude	Norm	Control	Intention
Intention - Direct	.620**	.241+	.201**	-
Communication - Direct	-.040	.134	.199*	.651**
Communication - Indirect	.427*	.129+	.113*	-

+ p < .01; * p < .05; ** p < .01

Figure 1. Final model : Effects of Attitude, Norm and Control on Intention and Constructive Communication

+ p < .01; * p < .05; ** p < .01, *** < .0001

Discussion and conclusion

The results mainly confirm the model proposed by the theory of planned behavior. The proposed model explains 46% of the total variance of constructive communication. Attitudes and subjective norm have no direct effect on communication, but only an indirect one through intention. However, in the case of perceived behavioral control we found only partial mediation of intention, with perceived behavioral control also having a direct effect on constructive communication. Since constructive communication during conflicts is a behavior mostly under the control of the individual, it is expected that perceived behavioral control is a good approximation of the actual behavioral control, resulting in a direct effect on actual behavior. Of the three factors, subjective norm has the weakest effect on intention. Since the social norm of constructive communication is well established in our sample of young adults, resulting in lower variance, it has a smaller effect on intention. Our results indicate that attitude, norm and control predict intention, and intention predicts actual behavior that is also affected by control directly, confirming the sequential relationship proposed by the theory of planned behavior.

