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Source: *Social Psychology Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Dec., 1979), pp. 415-420

Published by: American Sociological Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3033813>

Accessed: 07/12/2009 11:04

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The Volunteer Couple: Sex Differences, Couple Commitment, and Participation in Research on Interpersonal Relationships*

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Effects of sex differences and couple commitment on volunteering were explored in a two-year study of dating couples. Women were more likely than men to express interest in the study, somewhat more likely to be successfully recruited by their partners, and ultimately more likely to continue their participation. Both men and women were more likely to express initial interest if they were "going with" someone, and more likely at first to continue their participation if the relationship remained intact. Results are discussed in terms of sex roles and implications for research on male-female and other interpersonal relationships.

With the growth of research on interpersonal relationships (e.g., Huston and Levinger, 1978), there has been increasing interest in recruiting couples as research participants. Researchers must consider not only factors that lead one partner to volunteer for couples research, but also processes of decision-making and social influence through which couple members jointly decide to take part. The investigation of volunteering for couples research is of importance for two related reasons. First, as Rosenthal and Rosnow (1975) have documented, volunteers often differ from nonvolunteers in ways that limit the generalizability of research results. Second, the factors that lead some couples, but not others, to expose their relationships to the scrutiny of researchers are of substantive interest in their own right.

In their review of research on responding to surveys and volunteering for ex-

periments, Rosenthal and Rosnow (1975) note that when there is a significant sex difference, women are generally more likely to participate than men. The sex difference is reversed, however, for research that clearly involves physical or psychological stress; for example, men show greater willingness than women to volunteer for experiments involving electric shock. This pattern of findings seems congruent with traditional sex role expectations. Traditional sex roles call for women to be concerned with social and emotional matters, while men are supposed to stay "cool" and avoid emotional expression (e.g., Pleck and Sawyer, 1974). Thus, one would expect women to be more interested than men in taking part in social or "psychological" research, especially if it seems to call for emotional expression or self-disclosure. When research involves the endurance of stress, however, it may be regarded as a "masculine" activity—and, as a result, may be more likely to attract male than female volunteers.

As individuals, therefore, women might be more willing than men to volunteer for couples research. But volunteering as a couple is complicated by the fact that both partners must be willing to participate. As

* This research was supported by National Science Foundation grant GS-27422 to Zick Rubin. The authors would like to thank Claire Engers, Cynthia Mitchell, Susan Kaplan, and Richard Werther for their assistance in the data collection, and Robert Rosenthal, George Levinger, and two anonymous reviewers for comments on the manuscript. Address all communications to C. T. Hill, Department of Sociology, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195.

a result, couple volunteering raises additional issues related to sex roles and social influence. For example: Are men who are interested in taking part in a study more successful than interested women in influencing an opposite-sex partner to take part? Is success in recruiting one's partner related to one's overall power in the relationship?

Several studies have suggested that the more committed partners are to their relationship, the more interested they are—or the more eligible they feel—concerning research on couples (e.g., Kirby and Davis, 1972; Locke, 1954). For similar reasons, one would predict that those whose relationships have terminated are more likely to drop out of research than those whose relationships remain intact.

A two-year study of opposite-sex dating relationships (see Hill *et al.*, 1976) provided a unique opportunity to explore these issues. The data collection procedure was designed to illuminate both sex differences and effects of couple commitment on participation in three different phases of the research process. In phase 1, male and female students were contacted by mail and asked to return a short recruitment questionnaire, indicating whether or not they would be interested in participating in a study of opposite-sex relationships. This allowed exploration of differences in volunteering at the individual level. In Phase 2, interested students were invited to take part in the study together with their dating partner. This allowed comparison of those who did and those who did not in fact bring their partner to the study. Phase 3 consisted of a series of three followups administered six months, one year, and two years after the initial couples session. These followups make it possible to compare those who did and those who did not continue to participate in the study.

PHASE 1: INDIVIDUAL RECRUITMENT

Target Population

To obtain a sample of college students from a variety of academic and socioeconomic backgrounds, four coeducational colleges in the Boston area were selected:

a small nonsectarian private university, a large nonsectarian private university, a Jesuit university, and a state college enrolling commuter students. Lists of sophomores and juniors were obtained from each of the schools, and random samples were drawn. At each of the three smaller schools, 250 students were sampled in each of four categories: male sophomores, female sophomores, male juniors, and female juniors. At the largest school, 500 students were sampled in each category.

A letter was mailed to each of the 5000 students sampled, indicating that we were conducting a study of "college students and their opposite-sex relationships," and asking that the student return an enclosed two-page questionnaire. The questionnaire asked for information about the student's social background, whether or not the student was "going with" someone, and whether or not the student might be interested in further aspects of the research. Those who were going with someone were also asked how long they had been going together and whether they thought their partners might be interested in participating in the study.

Who Responded?

A total of 2322 students (46.4%) responded to the initial recruitment letter. Although equal numbers of letters were sent to men and women, significantly more questionnaires were returned by women than by men. Altogether, 52.77% of the women but only 40.0% of the men responded ($\chi^2 = 80.81$, $p < .001$). This sex difference was found at each of the schools sampled, although it was not statistically significant at the school with the lowest overall response rate (Table 1).

Among those returning the questionnaire, there was no difference between the percentage of men and women who said that they were interested in further aspects of the research (82.7% vs. 83.3%). Among those interested students who were going with someone, however, the men were more likely than the women to report that their partner might be interested in participation (75.9% vs. 65.2%, $\chi^2 = 14.04$, $p < .001$). Since the men's

Table 1. Sex Differences in Participation

	Percent Responding	
	Men	Women
<i>Phase 1: Individual Recruitment</i>		
Large private university	44.9%	63.2%**
Small private university	41.4	52.0**
Jesuit university	33.8	46.2**
State commuter college	35.2	39.0
Overall	40.0	52.7**
<i>Phase 2: Couple Participation</i>		
Attended session with partner ^a	55.9	45.6
<i>Phase 3: Continued Participation</i>		
Six-month followup (mail)	87.9	91.8
One-year followup (session)	68.0	65.8
Two-year followup (mail)	74.9	83.0*

^a Includes 12 couples for which both partners were independently invited. Comparison of men's and women's participation by χ^2 : * $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$.

partners were women, this too suggested greater interest in the research on the part of women compared to men—in this case, as seen through the eyes of their partners.

Not surprisingly, those respondents who said they were going with someone were more likely than those who were not going with anyone to say that they themselves were interested in further aspects of the research. This was true for both the women (85.5% vs. 80.5%, $\chi^2 = 5.12$, $p < .02$) and the men (88.3% vs. 76.8%, $\chi^2 = 21.89$, $p < .001$).

PHASE 2: COUPLE PARTICIPATION

Telephone Invitations

Responses on the recruitment questionnaire were used to identify those respondents who were going with someone, whose partner lived in the Boston area, who expressed interest in participating further, and who thought their partners might also be interested. Since a major goal of the overall research was to study the development of relationships, beginning in their relatively early stages, the major recruitment effort was directed at those respondents who said they had been going together for nine months or less.

The students who met all of the above criteria were telephoned individually and invited to come with their partner to a questionnaire session held afternoons or evenings at their school, or weekends at a

centrally located university.¹ The 145 men and 171 women contacted were told that at the sessions they and their partners would individually fill out questionnaires concerning their dating attitudes and experiences, and each would be paid \$1.50. Every effort was made to schedule sessions at convenient times, and many alternatives times were offered.

Who Participated?

Of the 316 respondents invited by telephone, 159 attended a questionnaire session with their partners (50.3%). Since 24 of these participants made up 12 couples for which both members were independently invited, 147 couples participated out of 304 couples invited (48.4%).

Among those invited, the men were somewhat more likely to participate than the women. Of the 145 men invited, 55.9% came to a questionnaire session; of the 171 women invited only 45.6% came ($\chi^2 = 3.29$, $p < .10$). It might be argued that the men's slightly greater success in bringing their partners to a session reflected their greater degree of influence or power in the relationship. An alternative—and perhaps more parsimonious—explanation, however, is that the task of persuading an opposite-sex partner to participate was easier for the men because the men's partners (women) were generally more interested in couples research than were the women's partners (men).

To explore social influence processes involved in couples' decisions to participate, we compared couples recruited through the male partner with couples recruited through the female partner. If a couple's participation were largely the result of the greater influence of the initially contacted partner, one might expect men in male-recruited couples to exercise relatively more power in their relationship than men in female-recruited couples.

¹ Since sex of caller may influence men's and women's response rates (cf. Sudman and Bradburn, 1974), the sex of the caller was systematically varied. However, sex of caller had no impact on the rate of participation of either male or female respondents—possibly because they had all been previously contacted by mail and had already expressed interest in the research.

This, however, did not appear to be the case. No systematic differences were found between male-recruited and female-recruited couples on various self-report measures of the balance of power (cf. Peplau *et al.*, 1976).²

Following the telephone recruitment of 147 couples who had been going together nine months or less, letters of invitation were sent to those respondents to the recruitment letter who said they and their partner were interested and who had been going together for longer periods of time; 55 such couples participated. In addition, 29 couples were recruited by advertising at the largest school sampled (at least one member of the couple had to be a sophomore or junior in college). In all, 231 couples attended initial questionnaire sessions. Characteristics of these couples were reported in Hill *et al.* (1976).

PHASE 3: CONTINUED PARTICIPATION

Changes in couple commitment were expected to affect willingness to continue to participate in longitudinal aspects of the research. In particular, it was predicted that members of couples who had broken up would be less likely to continue than those who were still together. In view of the sex difference in initial interest in the research, it was also predicted that women might be more likely than men to maintain interest in the study. These predictions were explored in a series of three followups at six months, one year, and two years after the initial couples session. In these followups, each person who had initially participated as a member of a couple was individually invited to complete another questionnaire; it was stressed that their participation was important whether or not the relationship was still intact.

² Male-recruited and female-recruited couples did differ on other measures, however, suggesting that a shift in sampling frame accompanies a change in the sex of the person initially contacted. In particular, all of the female-recruited women were sophomores or juniors in college (by sampling design), but 46.9% of the male-recruited women were not. Similarly, all of the male-recruited men were sophomores or juniors (by design), but 33.9% of the female-recruited men were not.

Six-Month and One-Year Followups

About six months after the initial session each participant was mailed a two-page questionnaire, and a year after the initial session each participant was invited to attend another questionnaire session at his or her school or at a centrally located school. There were no significant sex differences in responses to either of these followups (see Table 1): 91.8% of the women and 87.9% of the men responded at six months, and 65.8% of the women and 68.0% of the men attended sessions at one year. Since those who had moved out of town might have been unable to attend a session, the latter comparison was repeated for those known to be in the Boston area: again no sex difference was found. Once they had actually participated in the study, men and women were equally likely to continue their participation—at least initially.

As predicted, a major determinant of continued participation during the first year was whether or not the couple was still together. By six months after the initial session 18.2% of the couples had broken up (and 2.6% had an unknown status). A couple was classified as broken up if either partner reported that they had broken up. In most cases, the dating status of nonrespondents was determined by their partner's report; in a few cases it was learned by being able to contact nonrespondents by telephone. Individuals who were still together with their partner were more likely to respond to the questionnaire than those who had broken up. This was true for both men (92.9% vs. 78.6%, $\chi^2 = 7.95$, $p < .01$) and women (96.2% vs. 85.7%, $\chi^2 = 6.87$, $p < .01$). By one year after the initial session 31.6% of the couples had broken up (and 2.6% had an unknown status). Again those still together were more likely to participate, this time by attending a questionnaire session, and again this was true for both men (77.6% vs. 53.4%, $\chi^2 = 13.70$, $p < .001$) and women (79.6% vs. 42.5%, $\chi^2 = 31.04$, $p < .001$). Since those who had broken up were more likely to have moved away ($p < .05$), the analyses were repeated for those who still resided in the Boston area; the conclusions remained the same.

Two-Year Followup

By the end of the second year of the study, patterns of participation began to shift. By this point, two years after the initial session, 44.6% of the couples had broken up, 32.0% were still dating, and 18.5% were married (4.3% had an unknown status and one partner had died; see Hill *et al.*, 1976). A statistically significant sex difference emerged in responses to a four-page questionnaire sent by mail; 83.0% of the women responded in contrast to 74.9% of the men ($\chi^2 = 4.6$, $p < .05$; see Table 1). Women were likely to participate regardless of the status of the relationship (88.4% if married, 89.2% if dating, 84.4% if broken up, $p < .2$). Men, on the other hand, tended to be more likely to participate if married (86.1%) than if dating (78.4%) or broken up (74.7%; $p = .07$).

Why did the respondent's sex come to have a greater impact on participation with the passage of time? It seems likely that as one becomes further removed from one's initial involvement with a study, one's interest in the study will decline to at least some extent. It may be conjectured, however, that the women, who were apparently more likely to be interested in couples research in the first place, were also more likely than the men to remain interested enough to sustain their participation after two years passed. It should be noted, however, that there was virtually no sex difference in participation rates on the two-year followup among respondents (88.4% of the women vs. 86.1% of the men). This may reflect a greater tendency among married couples than among others to participate—or not—as a unit.

Why did breaking up have less impact on participation in the two-year followup than it had on the earlier followups? The diminished impact of the couple's continuing commitment might be attributed both to the passage of time itself and to the fact that the two-year followup involved only returning a short questionnaire in the mail. With the passage of time, earlier breakups might not have remained as salient or painful as they were previously. In addition, returning a questionnaire by mail

may have been less difficult or less embarrassing than attending a questionnaire session in person.

CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis of couple volunteering has potentially important implications for research on male-female and other interpersonal relationships. The sex difference in interest found in the present study, together with sex differences found in previous research, suggests that men's and women's willingness to participate in research may be influenced by sex-role expectations. If this interpretation is correct, it implies that men who are willing to participate in research on interpersonal relationships may be less traditional in their sex-role attitudes and behavior than men who do not volunteer. Hence research results may tend to underestimate men's adherence to traditional sex-role expectations. Unfortunately this interpretation could not be tested directly in the present study since it was not possible to measure the sex-role attitudes of those who did not respond to our recruitment letter.

While samples of volunteer couples may possibly underrepresent couples with the most traditional sex-role attitudes, at the same time they may also underrepresent couples whose members are not very committed to each other. Sometimes this bias is further increased by the researchers' desire to focus on relatively exclusive long-term relationships, and is reflected in their recruitment of only couples who are married or—as in the present study—only couples who are “going together.” Awareness of these possible biases in recruitment and volunteering may help in the design and interpretation of research on male-female and other interpersonal relationships.

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Social Psychology Quarterly
 1979, Vol. 42, No. 4, 420-425

Reactions to a Child's Mistakes as Affected by Her/His Looks and Speech*

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Extending the notion that aversive environmental stimuli can facilitate the display of involuntary aggressive reactions by those who are set to aggress, two experiments asked whether a child possessing unpleasant physical characteristics will be punished more severely than a normal-appearing youngster. In the first study, subjects (56 women) in a 2 x 2 factorial design were first deliberately provoked or not by a confederate, and then were required to discipline a 10-year-old girl who had either an attractive or unattractive appearance. The unattractive-looking child received more intense punishment than the good-looking girl. Indications are that the angry women were especially likely to displace aggression onto the unattractive-looking child. In the second experiment, all subjects (40 women) in a 2 x 2 design were provoked by a confederate, and then were required to discipline a 10-year-old boy who was either good-looking or not, and either a normal speaker or a stutterer. Again the unattractive-appearing child was disciplined more severely than the good-looking boy, and in the early trials the stuttering boy received stronger punishment than the nonhandicapped youngster. Both of these undesirable physical characteristics apparently tended to facilitate impulsive aggressive reactions.

Berkowitz (1978) has suggested that aversive events tend to produce an instigation to aggression. Since these unpleasant events are presumably the unconditioned stimuli to aggression-facilitating reactions, objects associated with them theoretically become conditioned aggressive stimuli, and could also elicit

aggression-facilitating responses. As a consequence, there supposedly is an inclination to strike at people having aversive characteristics as well as an urge to escape from them. Goffman's (1963) influential analysis of social stigmata leads to a somewhat similar expectation. Goffman noted that someone can be stigmatized for a variety of reasons, including birth defects and illness. Whatever the specific cause, according to Goffman this individual is regarded as imperfect in some vital way, and can draw prejudice and even ill-will from the nonstigmatized. Thus, both lines of thought suggest that there is a tendency to be harsh toward those having unpleasant physical qualities.

* The research reported here was supported by Research Grant #MH 17405 from the National Institute of Mental Health. The authors wish to express their appreciation to Robert Bartel and Jean Kunin for the very able manner in which they conducted the first experiment and to Erling Anderson and Linda Szczepkowski for their very capable assistance in Experiment 2. Address all communications to Leonard Berkowitz, Department of Psychology, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Madison, WI 53706.