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2

A Pronoun Analysis of Couples' Support Transactions.

3

(Research conducted in Dutch).

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Introduction

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2 After their first individual efforts of coping with stressful events, people most
3 likely turn to their intimate partner for support (Sullivan and Davila, 2010). Effective
4 support provision in couples refers to partners being responsive to each other's needs and
5 includes all actions that express care, confirm the support recipient's self-esteem, feelings
6 or behaviors, and that support the partner in coping with the stressful event (e.g., practical
7 assistance, providing information; Cutrona, 1996; Pasch and Bradbury, 1998; Rafaeli and
8 Gleason, 2009). Empirical studies convincingly produced evidence for this kind of
9 effective support being linked to relationship satisfaction and changes in relationship
10 satisfaction (e.g., Rafaeli and Gleason, 2009; Saitzyk et al., 1997; Verhofstadt et al.,
11 2013). An important mechanism assumed to underlie the connection between spousal
12 support and relationship satisfaction concerns the presence of relationship schemas
13 related to partners' so-called sense of 'we-ness'. According to Cutrona (1996) spouses'
14 supportive actions not only reduce the immediate distress of a stressful event but they
15 also foster the belief that the relationship may be an available supportive resource in times
16 of adversity/hardship. This belief then influences the recipient's evaluation of the quality
17 of the relationship and satisfaction with the relationship (Sullivan and Davila, 2010).
18 Bodenmann (2005) defines this sense of we-ness as partners' belief that they are both
19 committed to support each other in coping with personal difficulties. As such, a feeling
20 of we-ness during support interactions reflects a common—as opposed to individual—
21 experience of coping with stressful life events (Iafrate et al., 2012). Other authors,
22 particularly known from the cognitive interdependence literature, define the concept of
23 we-ness more broadly, as partners' shared identity as a couple—as opposed to an identity
24 as separate individuals (Agnew et al., 1998), whereas couples' sense of separateness

1 rather refers to an autonomous and individualistic representation of the self (an identity
2 as separate individual).

3 Traditionally, measurements of partners' sense of we-ness rely on self-report
4 questionnaires (e.g. Inclusion of the Other in the Self Scale; Aron et al., 1992) or
5 thematic/content analyses of partners' descriptions of memories of events within the
6 relationship (Krokoff et al., 1989) or the relationship itself (Fletcher et al., 1987). A third
7 type of measurement draws from psycholinguistic research, and involves analyses of
8 couples' pronoun usage (e.g., Slatcher, et al., 2008). Seider and colleagues (2009)
9 describe partners' usage of first-person plural pronouns (e.g., we, us, our) versus the use
10 of first- (e.g., I, me, my) or second-person singular (e.g., you, your) pronouns as a 'reliable
11 linguistic marker of an underlying shared versus separate dimension of identification' (p.
12 605). Other studies confirmed these findings and thus couples' usage of we-words versus
13 you/me-words may be considered to be an implicit but reliable measure of their sense of
14 we-ness versus separateness (e.g., Reid et al., 2007; Rohrbaugh et al., 2012).

15 Pronoun analysis might be a particularly interesting approach to measure partners'
16 sense of we-ness –as a shared meaning structure– during support interactions as it is less
17 biased than traditional self-report measures (Schwarz et al., 1998). Also couples' pronoun
18 usage is less controlled and suppressed than the content of their conversations or the
19 behavior they display (Seider et al., 2009). Several studies found a beneficial role of not
20 using first-person language use in dealing with stressful events (Kross et al., 2014). The
21 use of non-first-person language during introspection was associated with self-distancing
22 and this is in turn associated with less perceived distress (Kross et al., 2014; Park et al.,
23 2015). Furthermore, a manipulation of the pronoun usage 'we' may lead to an increase in
24 perceived relationship closeness and quality (Fitzsimons and Kay, 2004).

1 **Materials**

2 **Dyadic Adjustment Scale**

3 The DAS is a widely used questionnaire to assess partners' relationship satisfaction
4 (DAS, Spanier, 1976). The mean values of the global DAS within this study were 113.16
5 for men and 115.52 for women ($\alpha = .89$ and $.90$, respectively). DAS norms (Spanier,
6 1976) indicate an average satisfaction score of 114/115 for a married sample, thereby
7 suggesting that our sample is comparable to an average group of married couples in terms
8 of relationship satisfaction.

9

10 **The Social Support Interaction Task**

11 We applied a support interaction task similar to those used in previous observational
12 research on spousal support (e.g., Pasch and Bradbury, 1998; Verhofstadt et al., 2008).
13 The couples were guided into a laboratory that was furnished as a living room and was
14 equipped so that their support interactions could be videotaped with their prior knowledge
15 and consent. One spouse was designated to be the support seeker and the other spouse to
16 be the support provider. For a random half of the couples in the first lab discussion, the
17 male partner was designated as the support seeker, with the female partner in the role of
18 the support provider. For the other half of the couples in the first discussion, these roles
19 were reversed. In the second lab discussion, the partners traded their roles so that data
20 could be obtained for both partners in both roles. Before each interaction, the designated
21 support seeker was asked to discuss a salient personal problem (defined as any problem
22 of which the source was not the partner or the relationship, such as dealing with work
23 stress, tensions with family members, health issues) with his/her partner. The partners
24 were allowed to interact up to a maximum time limit of ten minutes.

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2 **Pronoun Analysis**

3 In order to derive an index of participants' sense of we-ness/separateness, a pronoun
4 analysis was conducted on the collected observational data. The pronoun analysis was
5 conducted by two trained research assistants and in accordance with the coding procedure
6 developed by Seider and his colleagues (2009; permission to use this procedure was
7 obtained). The first step of the coding process consisted of identifying each pronoun used
8 by our study participants. This required the verbatim transcription of the videotaped
9 support interactions. Secondly, each pronoun was classified in one of three categories: (a)
10 me-words, pronouns that refer to the self (e.g., me, my, mine, myself); (b) you-words,
11 pronouns that refer to the partner (e.g., you, yours, yourself) and (c) we-words, pronouns
12 that refer to the couple (e.g., we, ours, ourselves). This classification was based on the
13 coding-dictionary (in Dutch) that is enclosed in the data-set accompanying the current
14 manuscript (see below). Similar to Seider et al. (2009) the verbal context of participants'
15 pronoun was taken into account as well, given its influence on the meaning of a particular
16 pronoun. A subsequent contextual analysis was therefore conducted in which coders
17 assigned each pronoun into one of the following categories: (a) *Actual personal pronouns*
18 *targeting the speaker, the other spouse or the couple*, (b) *Dysfluencies*: pronouns used
19 prior to a repetition (e.g., "I . . . I, I wanted to do that") or in an interruption of a
20 proposition (e.g., 'And I was, no, ...), (c) *Generic*: pronouns referring to a general or
21 universal other (e.g., "You always get what you pay for"), (d) *Filler*: pronouns used as
22 part of an idiomatic phrase or as a 'mental comma' used to fill a speech pause but serve
23 no communicative function (e.g., "you know," "I don't know"), (e) *No code*: pronouns
24 used in references to the speech of a third person (e.g., "Yesterday, Mom said: 'Now I

1 have had enough”). Only the pronouns that were considered as *actual* personal pronouns
2 (cf. category *a*) were included in the data processing reported below.

3

4 **Data Processing**

5 After the contextual analysis, the number of me-words and you-words used by each study
6 participant were summed and divided by the total number of words spoken by this person
7 (“separateness”) and similarly for the number of we-words (“we-ness”). This procedure
8 resulted in four language scores for each partner: “we-ness” expressed in the support-
9 seeker role and in the support-provider role and “separateness” expressed in the support-
10 seeker role and in the support-provider role. Following this procedure, the range of each
11 language score was 0 to 1. Each transcript was coded by both coders, and the levels of
12 interrater agreement were calculated using the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (two
13 way random-effects model; absolute agreement) and all of the Intraclass Correlation
14 Coefficients indicated good levels of interrater reliability, both for men ($ICC_{we-ness} = .99$;
15 $ICC_{separateness} = .95$) and women ($ICC_{we-ness} = .97$; $ICC_{separateness} = .94$). Means and standard
16 deviations for the pronoun variables (see Table 1) were highly comparable with existing
17 research (Rohrbaugh et al., 2012; Seider et al., 2009).

18

1 **Table 1**

2 *Mean Proportions and Standard Deviations for We-ness and Separateness*

	Male seeker/ Female provider interaction		Female seeker/ Male provider interaction	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
	Separateness	.074 (SD = .020)	.080 (SD = .022)	.081 (SD = .024)
We-ness	.008 (SD = .011)	.009 (SD = .010)	.009 (SD = .008)	.008 (SD = .007)

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4 **Dataset Description**

5 The data discussed in this manuscript have been deposited in Data Archiving and
 6 Networked Services (DANS) and are accessible through the following hyperlink
 7 <http://dx.doi.org/10.5072/dans-2bs-mqh6> under the name ‘A Pronoun Analysis of
 8 Flemish Couples' Support Transactions (Research conducted in Dutch)’. The data
 9 contains two files: (1) a .xlsx file containing the pronouns coding-dictionary and the raw
 10 data resulting from the pronoun coding by each of the two coders; (2) a .sav file containing
 11 all the processed data (demographic data, scale and total scores of the relationship
 12 satisfaction questionnaires and mean language scores resulting from the pronoun
 13 analysis).

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