

marital happiness

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Marital happiness is a judgment made by a spouse that indicates the sense of well being or satisfaction he or she experiences in the marital relationship. Ever since changing social and economic conditions at the end of the nineteenth century prompted concern about the breakdown of the family, social scientists have sought to understand marital functioning. The two earliest studies in this domain were on sexual behavior (predating Kinsey by a decade) and both examined its role in marital happiness. The central status accorded happiness in this nascent research area gained the attention of researchers from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, family studies and communications. To this day, what has been variously labelled marital happiness, satisfaction, adjustment, success, companionship or some synonym reflective of the quality of the marriage remains the most frequently studied aspect of marriage. This focus is perhaps not surprising because the protective effect of a happy marriage for the mental and physical health of spouses, as well as the healthy development of their children, is well documented.

Initially researchers, mostly sociologists, paid greatest attention to identifying demographic correlates of marital happiness using large scale surveys (the *sociological tradition*) and went on to complement this effort by examining individual differences associated with marital happiness. In reviewing 50 years of this research genre, Nye (1988, p. 315) concluded: “early on [1939]...Burgess and Cottrell...took every individual characteristic they could think of and correlated it with marital success, producing an R of about .50 ...Not a bad start, but we have not progressed much beyond that point in 50 years.”

Not surprisingly, this approach was foregone when psychologists began to systematically study marriage in the late 1960s and 1970s. Efforts turned instead to focus on identifying observable interaction behaviors that might underlie marital happiness (the *behavioral tradition*). The findings of the extensive literature that emerged on the behavioral correlates of marital happiness can be summarized in terms of a simple ratio: the ratio of agreements to disagreements is greater than 1 for happy couples and less than 1 for unhappy couples. In addition, observational research documented that the behavior of happily married couples is less predictable (structured) than that of unhappy spouses who tend to reciprocate one another's (negative) behavior. Although seemingly obvious, such findings contradicted the long-standing belief that happy couples are characterized by a quid pro quo principle according to which they exchange positive behavior. Reliably both observed and self reported behavior account for approximately 25% of the variance in marital happiness.

The limits of a behavioral account of marital happiness became apparent by the 1980s at which time attention began to focus on processes that might mediate the behavioral exchanges associated with marital happiness (the *mediational tradition*). One such process is affect and research on affect began to flourish (though study of marital happiness as affect never took root). A simple index of affect, for which considerable data already existed, was nonverbal behavior.

For example, affect codes are more powerful than verbal codes in discriminating happy from unhappy couples and happy couples are distinguished from unhappy couples more by their relatively fewer displays of negative affect, rather than by more displays of positive affect. Other affect indices investigated include verbal reports and physiological measures such as autonomic nervous system activity during couple interaction. Happy couples score more highly on measures of affect-laden relationship beliefs, such as love, affection, trustworthiness and honesty. As regards physiological indices of affect, Gottman reports that greater correspondence in the physiological systems of spouses during interaction is inversely related to their marital happiness. However, contradictory findings showing greater correspondence among happy couples likely reflects the difficulty of obtaining reliable physiological data during spontaneous social interaction. Perhaps as a consequence promising hypotheses involving physiological data (e.g., that arousal prior to and during marital interaction predict later marital happiness) have not been supported upon further analysis.

Other potential mediators of behavior exchanges that underlie marital happiness are cognitive variables and they have also received considerable attention from marital researchers. Most frequently investigated is the association between attributions, or explanations for events, and relationship happiness, making it possibly the most robust, replicable phenomenon in the study of marriage. Happiness is associated with attributing negative relationship events (e.g., spouse arrives home late from work) to impermanent, specific causes located outside of the partner (e.g., s/he was delayed by traffic) and positive events to stable partner characteristics (e.g., personality traits). Alternative explanations for this attribution-happiness association have been ruled out (e.g., depression) and these attribution patterns have been shown to not only predict responses to partner behaviors but also later levels of marital happiness as well as the trajectory of happiness over time. Marital happiness is also positively related to a number of other cognitive variables, including secure attachment models, smaller partner and ideal standards discrepancies, greater downward social comparison, memory biases that reflect negatively biased recall of the past (resulting in the belief that the marriage has improved); and self-evaluation maintenance processes that change the nature of couple communication and moderate responses to differences in decision making power.

The Need for Theory

As noted, interest in marital happiness was initiated and facilitated by practical concerns and this may be why research on marital happiness has never been heavily theoretical. As Glenn (1990) points out in his decade review, most research is justified on practical grounds "with elements of theory being brought in on an incidental, ad hoc basis" (p. 818). The relative absence of theory has had unfortunate consequences. For example, Spanier eliminated items from his influential measure when they were positively skewed thereby assuming that items reflective of marital quality approximate a normal distribution. But such items may be less critical indicators or even irrelevant to marital quality if marital quality inherently involves skewed data because spouses tend to report happy marriages. Moreover, if the outcome predicted by marital happiness is itself skewed (e.g., aggression), then a skewed predictor may be best.

The disjuncture between theory and measurement has had important consequences. First, it is not clear what most instruments used to index marital happiness actually measure. Most frequently, measures comprise a polyglot of items (e.g., subjective evaluations, behavioral reports) and responses to them are not conceptually equivalent. Typically, an overall score is computed by summing over the items but it is not clear how such a score should be interpreted. Although this problem was identified in the marital literature over 45 years ago, it remains an

issue. As a result, knowledge of the determinants and correlates of marital happiness includes (an unknown number of) spurious findings that reflect overlapping item content in measures of marital happiness and measures of constructs examined in relation to it.

In response to these concerns several scholars have argued that marital happiness is best conceptualized as subjective, global evaluations of the relationship. The strength of this approach is its conceptual simplicity as it avoids the problem of interpretation that arises in many omnibus measures of marital happiness. Because it has a clear cut interpretation, this approach allows the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of marital happiness to be examined in a straightforward manner.

Emerging Themes

One or Many Dimensions?

The above conceptualization of marital happiness has not changed the operational definition of the construct as a single, bipolar dimension. Thus, marital happiness reflects evaluation of the marriage in which positive features are salient and negative features are relatively absent whereas unhappiness reflects an evaluation in which negative features are salient and positive features are relatively absent. This view has been challenged on the grounds that positive and negative evaluations can be conceptualized and measured as separate, though related, dimensions. Data obtained with a simple measure used to capture this two-dimensional conception of marital happiness indicate that the dimensions have different correlates and account for unique variance in reported and observed behaviors and attributions independently of individual affect and omnibus measures of marital happiness. This stands in stark contrast to the widespread view, supported by factor analytic approaches, that standard measures of marital happiness reflect a single underlying dimension.

Continuum or Category?

A fundamental question that can be asked of many psychological constructs like marital happiness is whether they reflect underlying categories or an underlying continuum. Determining the underlying structure has important theoretical implications in pointing researchers towards linear vs. non-linear models. Using recently developed taxonometric procedures it has been shown that approximately 20% of recently married couples experience marriage in a way that may be qualitatively and not merely quantitatively different than their peers. Taxon and complement members also differed on a number of relationship variables and exhibited a different pattern of connections among marital variables.

Snapshot or Movie?

An important new development is the notion that marital happiness is appropriately conceptualized not as a judgment made at a single time point but as a trajectory that reflects fluctuations in happiness over time. Growth curve analysis that allows trajectories to be computed for individual spouses and their partners is being used increasingly in marital research and rate of change in marital happiness is being examined in relation to other variables of interest. From this perspective, marital happiness at one point in time cannot be fully understood without reference to earlier or later data points.

Context Independent or Context Specific?

The emergence of relationship science, that embraced the broader environmental context in which relationships exist, and an influential model of marriage, the vulnerability-stress-adaptation model, has focused attention on the milieu within which marriages operate, including microcontexts (e.g., the presence of children, life stressors and transitions) and macrocontexts (e.g., economic factors, perceived mate availability). Accordingly, marital processes (and by

implication happiness) are thought to increase in importance to the extent that the couple experiences stress and research on contextual or ecological factors in marriage has expanded dramatically in recent years.

The Future: Consummating the Marriage with Positive Psychology

Concomitant with the rise of positive psychology as a new field of inquiry has been awareness that marital happiness is not simply the absence of unhappiness and an emphasis in public policy (at least in the USA) on “healthy” marriage. These developments have no doubt facilitated interest in larger meanings and deeper motivations about relationships, including a focus on constructs that are decidedly more positive. This has re-stimulated work on commitment in a marriage, a topic long emphasized but frequently overlooked in marital research. Equally important, it has introduced a number of constructs into marital research that are of particular interest to positive psychology.

A thriving literature on *forgiveness* in marriage shows that it is strongly related to marital happiness as well as several key constructs in the marital domain. Forgiveness can be seen conceptually as falling on a dimension of positive coping responses, like *social support*, another construct that is now receiving considerable attention. Not only is supportive spouse behavior related to current marital happiness, it also predicts less future marital stress, independently of conflict behavior.

In a related vein, *sacrifice* is beginning to emerge as a virtue in marriage. In the context of marriage, sacrifice refers to behavior in which one gives up some immediate personal desire to benefit the marriage or the partner, reflecting the transformation from self-focus to couple focus. Satisfaction with sacrificing for one’s spouse is associated with both concurrent and later marital happiness, with attitudes about sacrifice predicting later happiness better than earlier marital happiness.

Viewing Marital Happiness through the Lens of Positive Psychology

It is apparent that a marriage has occurred recently between research on marital happiness and constructs central to positive psychology. Equally apparent is that the marriage with positive psychology has not been formally declared, let alone consummated. However, the case for consummating this marriage is strong.

Viewing marital happiness through the lens of positive psychology has implications for a more complete understanding not only of relationships but of the human condition. Marital happiness has the potential to enhance functioning and not simply protect against dysfunction. But like psychology itself, marital research has focused primarily on human dysfunction. What positive emotions, strengths and virtues correlate with marital happiness? As noted, the fledgling research relevant to this question is meagre indeed. Our inability to answer this question immediately points to the need to broaden the nomological network in which marital happiness is situated to include strengths and virtues.

Declaring and consummating the marriage with positive psychology has important practical implications and thus speaks to the motivating force that has propelled marital research. Specifically, programs designed to help couples should not be evaluated merely in terms of the prevention or amelioration of dysfunction (as is current practice) but also in terms of their ability to promote optimal functioning. How does the experience of marital happiness contribute to the good life? Indeed, the lens of positive psychology alerts us to an important but relatively unexplored issue pertaining to marital happiness, its meaning for the spouse. And, as Fincham, Stanley and Beach (2007, p. 276) point out, a focus on meaning sets the stage for “examination of transformative, rather than merely incremental, change in relationships.”

Consummating this marriage is equally important for positive psychology. The individualistic bias in the broader discipline from which it sprung is also evident in positive psychology. It is hard to conceive of a fully actualized positive psychology that does not include a central focus on intimate relationships like marriage. Humans are nothing if not social animals. There is much for each party to gain from this marriage. Let the consummation begin.

SEE ALSO: Family functioning; Family quality of life;

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