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Relationship satisfaction

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In Western culture, the vast majority of people marry or cohabit, and expectations of couple relationships are high. Marriage is portrayed as providing lifelong companionship, romance, support, sexual fulfilment and commitment. But a high proportion of couples experience an erosion of these positive qualities over time and, for some, relationship satisfaction erodes to the point where the relationship is terminated. For others, however, the barriers to separation, or the perceived absence of alternatives, may result in remaining married despite being unhappy with the relationship. It is not surprising therefore that some 40% of the problems for which people seek professional help in the USA concern their spouse/marriage, a proportion that is twice the size of any other problem area (Veroff et al., 1981). And when intimate relationships like marriage go wrong, the costs can be high -- marital distress, separation, and divorce are associated with just about any physical or mental health problem one cares to name (see Fincham & Beach, 1999).

Emergence of interest in relationship satisfaction

At the beginning of the twentieth century changing economic and social conditions called public attention to relationship problems in families and ushered in a period of emerging science. The desire to understand and remediate family problems led to direct study of family relationships using empirically based procedures. The two earliest studies in this domain were on sexual behavior (predating Kinsey by a decade) and both examined its role in relationship satisfaction or success (Davis, 1928; Hamilton, 1948).

The central status accorded relationship satisfaction in marital research became even more salient in two later projects that are often credited with establishing marital research as an area of empirical inquiry. Terman et al.'s (1938) book, *Psychological factors in marital happiness*, described a questionnaire study of 1133 couples designed to identify the determinants of marital satisfaction. Burgess and Cottrell (1939) similarly reported a questionnaire study of 526 couples in *Predicting success or failure in marriage*. Both books are classic texts and report studies that

became the prototypes for later research in their attempt to identify correlates of marital satisfaction.

In short, satisfaction is viewed as the final common pathway that leads to relationship breakdown (Jacobson, 1985) and has been the dominant construct studied in the literature on relationships such as marriage. Not surprisingly, it has gained the attention of researchers from a variety of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, family studies and communications. Initially researchers, mostly sociologists, paid greatest attention to identifying demographic correlates of marital satisfaction (the sociological tradition), a focus forgone in the late 1960s and 1970s when observation of couple behavior assumed center stage (the behavioral tradition). Beginning in the 1980s recognition of the limits of a purely behavioral account of marriage gave rise to study of variables such as cognition and affect that might mediate the relation between behavior and marital satisfaction (the mediational tradition). For a more complete historical account see Fincham and Bradbury (1990).

Overview of Satisfaction in Close Relationships

Before providing a brief synopsis of major findings regarding relationship satisfaction we briefly highlight salient features of scholarship on this topic.

The Nature of Relationship Satisfaction Research

A first important feature of writings on relationship satisfaction is that they focus almost exclusively on Western, and more particularly, North American relationships. Moreover, with a few recent exceptions (e.g., Fletcher, Simpson & Thomas, 2000; Hendrick, Dick & Hendrick, 1998) most of the assessment devices used to study relationship satisfaction have focused on one particular relationship, marriage. This is both a strength and weakness. It is a strength in that there is a widespread agreement, though not consensus, in North American society that marriage is primarily for the benefit of the spouses rather than the extended family, society, the ancestors, deity or deities, and so on. Widespread agreement on the hedonic purpose of marriage has the

potential to simplify the task of researchers engaged in assessing and understanding relationship satisfaction and thereby promote advances in understanding. On the other hand, there is the strong temptation to insert into our measures of satisfaction items that may not be applicable in other cultures. For example, an assessment of marital satisfaction that asks who the respondent would marry if she had her life to live over again (as in one of the most widely used measures of marital quality, the Marital Adjustment Test, MAT, Locke & Wallace, 1959), is clearly not applicable in cultures where arranged marriages are accepted practice. Likewise, questions assessing disagreements may be poor indicators of marital satisfaction in cultures where disagreement with a spouse is discouraged.

Second, the literature on relationship satisfaction is characterized by a lack of adequate theory. As Glenn (1990) points out in regard to the study of marital satisfaction, most research is justified on practical grounds "with elements of theory being brought in on an incidental, ad hoc basis" (p. 818). Lack of attention to theory has had unfortunate consequences. For example, Spanier (1976) eliminated items from his influential measure (the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, DAS) when they were positively skewed thereby assuming that items reflective of marital quality approximate a normal distribution. But as Norton (1983) points out, 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 quality is itself skewed (e.g., aggression), then a skewed predictor may be best (Heyman, Sayers & Bellack, 1994). Conceptual confusion has resulted in a large number of terms, such as adjustment, success, happiness, companionship or some synonym reflective of the quality of the relationship being used interchangeably to refer to satisfaction. As a result, some scholars have even called for elimination of such terms as marital satisfaction and marital adjustment from the literature (Trost, 1985).

Third, relationship satisfaction is almost exclusively assessed using self-report. However, self-reported satisfaction gives us little information on the processes involved in “the final common pathway” that results in relationship breakdown. Ironically, even behaviorally oriented psychologists who rejected the utility of self report when they began to study marriage systematically in the 1970s used self-reported satisfaction as a criterion variable in their studies. Indeed, a primary goal was to account for variability in such reports of marital satisfaction. This feature of the literature is important when considering the two dominant approaches that have been used to study marital satisfaction. One approach has been to view marital quality as a characteristic of the relationship between spouses instead of, or in addition to, the spouses’ feelings about the marriage. This approach has tended to favor use of such terms as adjustment. However, it is questionable whether spouses are the best, or even good, reporters of relationship properties. Self-report seems better suited to the second major approach to marital quality which focuses on how married persons feel about their marriage. This approach has tended to use such terms as marital satisfaction and marital happiness.

Fourth it is not clear what most instruments of relationship satisfaction actually measure. Most frequently, measures comprise a polyglot of items and responses to them are not conceptually equivalent. For example, on the MAT items include ratings of disagreement on 8 issues (most, but not all, of which are scored from 0 to 5), and questions like “Do you ever wish you had not married?” (scored as 0, 1, 8 or 10 depending on responses). The inclusion of behavioral and subjective categories and the number and weighting of items used to assess each category varies across measures of marital satisfaction, making it unclear what these tools actually measure. The summation of various dimensions of marriage in omnibus measures of marital satisfaction (e.g. interaction, happiness) also precludes meaningful study of the interplay between such dimensions (e.g., interaction may influence satisfaction and vice versa).

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 40 years ago (see Nye & McDougall, 1959), it remains an issue. Dahlstrom (1969) describes three levels at which responses to self report inventories can be interpreted: they can be seen (a) as veridical descriptions of behavior (e.g., responses regarding frequency of disagreement reflect the actual rate of disagreement between spouses), (b) as potential reflections of attitudes (e.g., frequently reported disagreement may reflect high rates of disagreement but may also reflect the view that the partner is unreasonable, that the spouse feels undervalued or some other attitude), and (c) as behavioral signs the meaning of which can only be determined by actuarial data (e.g., rated disagreement may reflect time spent together, respondent's self esteem, frequency of intercourse or a host of other variables). Few measures of relationship quality address the level at which responses are to be interpreted

A fifth feature of relationship satisfaction research follows naturally from the last, namely, that our knowledge of the determinants and correlates of relationship satisfaction includes (an unknown number of) spurious findings. This is because of overlapping item content in measures of satisfaction and measures of constructs examined in relation to it. The often documented association between self-reported communication (e.g., Marital Communication Inventory; "Do the two of you argue a lot over money?"; "Do you and your and your spouse engage in outside activities together?") and marital satisfaction (DAS; "Indicate the extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner on: handling family finances", "Do you and your mate engage in outside interests together") is a particularly egregious example of this problem.. The resulting tautological association hinders theory construction and affects the credibility of research findings. Fincham and Bradbury (1987) discuss the dilemma caused by overlapping item content at some length showing that exclusion of the items common to both

measures does not provide a satisfactory solution to this problem as they usually reflect overlap in the definition of the constructs.

Major Findings

Using quantitative measures of relationship satisfaction as criteria for group membership, a variety of studies have attempted to pinpoint what differentiates happy and unhappy relationships. However, the discovery of these correlates has been accompanied by "little or no explanation of why the correlations exist" (Raush, Barry, Hertel & Swain, 1974, p. 4) and by the 1960s there was considerable dissatisfaction with the research, particularly its reliance on self-report. In 1961 Raush et al. began to examine the overt behaviors of couples engaged in improvised marital conflicts in the laboratory.

Below we briefly summarize what has been learned about behavioral, cognitive, and emotive correlates of relationship satisfaction, recognizing that the distinctions among these three constructs are in many ways artificial.

Behavior. Attempts to identify the behavioral correlates of relationship satisfaction have taken two major forms. Using spouses as observers of their partners' behaviors, researchers have attempted to examine behaviors that covary with daily reports of marital satisfaction. A second strategy entailed laboratory observation of couples who reported high and low marital satisfaction.

The first point to note is that agreement between spouses in reports of daily marital behaviors is low (average 46%, Christensen & Nies, 1980) and is not improved by training spouses as observers. Such findings raise questions about the epistemological status of spouse reports of partner behavior suggesting that they may reflect more about the reporter's perceptions than the observed spouse's behavior. With this caveat in mind, it has been found that reported spouse behaviors covary only slightly with daily reports of satisfaction (the two variables share about 25% of their variance), the covariation remains slight even when lists of behaviors are

customized for each couple, behaviors classed as affective are more highly related to satisfaction than other classes of behavior (e.g. instrumental), events experienced as displeasing (e.g., “spouse interrupted me”) are more highly related to satisfaction ratings than events that are “pleasing,” and the association between daily behaviors and satisfaction is higher in dissatisfied than satisfied spouses (for a review see, Weiss & Heyman, 1997).

Although questionable as veridical reports of partner behavior, some of the results obtained for spouse reports of behavior are remarkably consistent with the findings that emerge from observed couple interactions. For example, negative behaviors appear to more consistently distinguish satisfied from dissatisfied couples. As several comprehensive reviews exist, we provide only a brief overview of findings (for reviews see Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Kelly, Fincham & Beach, 2002; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). Compared to satisfied couples, distressed couples show a range of dysfunctional communicative behaviors, including higher levels of specific negative behaviors such as criticisms and complaining, hostility, defensiveness and disengagement, such as not responding or tracking the partner. Distressed couples also fail to actively listen to each other when interacting. We also know that these negative interactional behaviors are more likely to occur in some settings than others. Diary studies show that stressful marital interactions occur more frequently in couples' homes on days of high general life stress, at times and places associated with multiple competing demands and that topics of disagreements often coincide with the activities partners are engaged in at the time.

Recent research has shown that the giving and receipt of support behaviors are related to satisfaction and to important health outcomes. For example, wives' supportive behaviors predicted decreased satisfaction 24 months later independently of either partners' conflict behaviors and supportive behaviors moderated the association between conflict behavior and later marital deterioration with compromised conflict skills leading to greater risk of lower satisfaction

in the context of poor support communication (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; see also Bradbury, Fincham & Beach, 2000).

With regard to sequences of behavior, the “signature” of dissatisfied couples is the existence of reciprocated negative behavior that tends to escalate in intensity. In fact, one of the greatest challenges for couples locked into negative exchanges is to find an adaptive way of exiting from such cycles (Gottman, 1998). This is usually attempted through responses designed to repair the interaction (e.g., metacommunication, "You're not listening to me") that are typically delivered with negative affect (e.g., irritation, sadness). Distressed couples tend to respond to the negative affect thereby continuing the cycle. This makes their interactions more structured and predictable. In contrast, satisfied couples appear to be more responsive to the repair attempt and are thereby able to exit from negative exchanges early on. For example, a spouse may respond to “Please, you’re not letting me finish” with “Sorry... please finish what you were saying.” Their interaction therefore appears more random and less predictable.

A second interaction pattern commonly observed in dissatisfied couples is that one spouse pressures the other with demands, complaints, and criticisms, while the partner withdraws with defensiveness and passive inaction. This interaction pattern is commonly referred to as the demand/withdraw pattern. Christensen and Heavey (1990) examined interactions of couples discussing a topic chosen by each spouse and found that frequency of demands by the female partner and withdrawal by the male partner were negatively related to marital satisfaction. That female-demand and male-withdrawal are associated with low relationship satisfaction is consistent with other gender differences in communication. In particular, women display more negative affect and behavior than do men, and male partners make more statements suggestive of withdrawal, such as not responding and making irrelevant comments (Weiss & Heyman, 1997).

However, inferring reliable gender differences in demand-withdraw patterns would be premature. To clarify this issue, Heavey, Christensen, and Malamuth (1995) explored how

demand/withdraw patterns vary according to which partner's problem issue was discussed. When discussing the husband's issue, there were no systematic differences in the roles taken by each spouse. However when discussing the wife's issue, women were much more likely to be demanding and men more likely to be withdrawing than the reverse. Similarly, Klinetob and Smith (1996) found that demand-withdraw patterns switch polarity when the topics chosen for discussion clearly focus on an issue of change for each partner. These results provide good evidence that although men and women tend to play different roles in typical dysfunctional communications, these roles are sensitive to context and are particularly sensitive to whose issue is under discussion.

Finally, conflict interaction patterns seem to be relatively stable over time and to predict changes in marital satisfaction and marital stability (see Karney & Bradbury, 1995). For example, Gottman et al. (1998) found that active listening, anger, and negative affect reciprocity among newlyweds predicted marital satisfaction and stability six years later. However, the work on social support suggests it is important to consider such relations in a broader context (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998). In a similar vein, in the context of high levels of affectional expression between spouses, the inverse correlation between negative spouse behavior and marital satisfaction becomes significantly weaker (Huston & Chorost, 1994). Affectional expression is also important for understanding the association between the demand-withdraw pattern and satisfaction; the demand-withdraw pattern was unrelated to marital satisfaction in the context of high affectional expression but the two variables were inversely related in the context of average or low affectional expression (Caughlin & Huston, 2002).

Cognition. The role of cognitive variables in understanding relationship satisfaction has received considerable attention (for reviews see Fincham, 1994, 2001; Karney, McNulty & Bradbury, 2001). Most research on cognition has studied the content of cognitions. For example, early on research examined unrealistic relationship

beliefs (e.g., Disagreement is destructive, partners cannot change, sexual perfectionism, mindreading is expected, and the Sexes cannot change) showing that they are related to dissatisfaction, observed couple behavior, and couple therapy outcome.

In contrast, more recent studies have examined functional unrealistic beliefs. For example, Murray, Holmes, and Griffin (1996) investigated the extent to which idealized spousal qualities (e.g., kindness, affection, openness, patience, understanding, responsiveness, tolerance and acceptance), were characteristic of happy dating and married couples. Happy couples were found to view their partners in a more positive light than their partners viewed themselves, and individuals were happier in their relationships when they idealized their partner and their partners idealized them. In a similar vein, Murray et al., (2002) show that egocentrically assuming similarities between partner and self that do not exist is characteristic of being in a satisfying relationship. This work showing that cognitive distortions are important in satisfied relationships is consistent with earlier work that shows happy spouses make egocentric attributions for negative relationships events (e.g., arguments) but partner centric attributions for positive relationships events (Fincham & Bradbury, 1989).

More work has been conducted on attributions in close relationships than on any other cognitive variable. Evidence for an association between attribution and relationship satisfaction is overwhelming making it possibly the most robust, replicable phenomenon in the study of close relationships (Fincham, 2001). Specifically, certain attributions for relationship events (e.g., spouse arrives home late from work) can promote relationship satisfaction (e.g., “s/he was delayed by traffic,” an attribution that locates cause outside of partner, is impermanent and does not influence other areas of the relationship and absolves partner of blame) or dissatisfaction (e.g., “s/he is selfish and cares more about work than about me,” which locates an unchanging cause - selfishness – with implications for many areas of the relationship, in the partner, and makes the partner blameworthy). Alternative explanations for this attribution –satisfaction

association that have been ruled out include anger and depression, general negative affectivity, measurement error, overlap between the assessment of attributions and satisfaction, and relationship violence (see Fincham, 2001).

The importance of attributions for relationship satisfaction is emphasized by longitudinal data showing that attributions may influence marital satisfaction. In each study only the variance that attributions do not share with satisfaction is used to predict changes in satisfaction making it difficult to account for findings by arguing that attributions are a proxy index of relationship satisfaction. Four longitudinal studies show that attributions predict later satisfaction, a temporal relationship that is independent of partner depression. A fifth more recent study spanning an 18 month period suggests that the association is mediated by the impact of attributions on efficacy expectations which, in turn, influenced satisfaction (Fincham, Harold & Gano-Phillips, 1999). Finally, Karney and Bradbury (2000) found that intraindividual changes in attribution and in marital satisfaction covaried. Moreover, controlling for within subject covariation, initial attributions had greater effects on the trajectory of marital satisfaction than Time 1 satisfaction had on the trajectory of attributions. Specifically, more conflict promoting attributions at Time 1 were associated with steeper declines in satisfaction, and satisfaction that covaried less with subsequent changes in attributions.

Relationship satisfaction is also related to a number of other cognitive variables, including *working models of attachment* with greater satisfaction being related to secure attachment (Meyers & Landsberger, 2002); perception of the *partner and ideal standards discrepancies* with smaller discrepancies being related to greater satisfaction (Campbell et al., 2001); *social comparison processes* such that greater downward comparison (and hence greater perceived superiority) is associated with greater satisfaction (Buunk & Ybema, 2003); *memory* in that more satisfied partners believe that their relationships have improved over the past by negatively biasing recall of the past (Karney & Coombs, 2000); and *self-evaluation maintenance processes*

influence satisfaction by changing the nature of couple communication, producing positive and negative emotional reactions to interactions involving the partner, and moderating responses to differences in decision making power in marital relationships (Beach et al., 1998; O'Mahen, Beach, & Tesser, 2000).

Emotion. A variety of indices of emotion have been examined in marital research. An index of emotion which has long been utilized is nonverbal behavior. While such assessment of affect is clearly simplistic, several fascinating findings support the centrality of affect in couple satisfaction. For example, affect codes are more powerful than verbal codes in discriminating satisfied from dissatisfied couples with groups being distinguished by their use of neutral and negative, rather than positive affect. Interestingly, while dissatisfied spouses are able to alter verbal behavior if instructed to pretend to be happily married, they are unable to change their nonverbal behavior (Vincent et al., 1979).

Other indices of emotion investigated include verbal report, "on-line" affect ratings, and physiological measures such as heart rate. As might be expected satisfied partners score higher on self-report indices of emotion suggesting that positive affect is an important component of marital satisfaction (although this finding is not surprising given that affect-related items appear in relationship satisfaction assessments). To investigate affective experience during interactions, partners have been asked to make continuous ratings of affect as they review a videotape of their interaction. Typically these consist of a rating dial with a semicircular arc which is manipulated to represent how they felt (ranging from very negative to very positive). As might be expected, satisfied spouses experience problem solving interactions with their partner as more positive than distressed couples.

Gottman and colleagues also took "on-line" measurements of autonomic nervous system activity during the course of low and high conflict discussions. It was found that physiological interrelatedness (or "physiological linkage") between partners occurred at the times when

negative affect was reported as occurring and being reciprocated, was higher in the high conflict task compared to the low conflict task, and was inversely related to marital satisfaction (see Gottman & Notarius, 2000). In contrast, Thomsen and Gilbert (1998) find greater synchrony or correspondence in physiological systems among satisfied couples than dissatisfied couples. Such discrepancies show that it can be difficult to obtain reliable physiological data during spontaneous social interaction (e.g., Sanders, Halford, & Behrens, 1999) and that, perhaps as a consequence, promising hypotheses involving physiological data (e.g., that arousal prior to and during marital interaction predict later marital satisfaction) have not been supported upon further analysis (Gottman & Levenson, 1992).

Notwithstanding the above observations there is strong evidence that emotion will be an essential component in any complete understanding of relationship satisfaction and is integral to the experience of marital dissatisfaction. However, its exact role vis-a-vis change in satisfaction remains unclear as some studies show, for example, that negative affect is detrimental for marriage, while others show that negative affect promotes marital satisfaction or is unrelated to change in satisfaction (for discussions see Fincham & Beach, 1999; Gottman & Notarius, 2000). Lack of replication across laboratories and even within laboratories is a problem and it is unlikely that the role of affect in eroding or supporting relationship satisfaction will become clear without clarification of the conceptual underpinnings of affect-related constructs, and refinement of the methods used to observe emotion and to document their impact on relationships over time.

Coda. The challenge for understanding relationship satisfaction given the overlap between it and other relevant constructs at both the conceptual level and the level of measurement operations, has already been noted. In similar vein, the concept of sentiment override also poses a challenge to the validity of research findings on relationship satisfaction. Weiss (1980) coined the term “sentiment override” to describe the hypothesis that spouses respond noncontingently to partner behavior or questions about the marriage. In other words partners simply respond to each

other or research questions in terms of their dominant feeling or sentiment about the relationship and this is reflected "in as many tests as one chooses to administer" (Weiss & Heyman, 1990, p. 92). Belief in this position is so strong that attempts to explain variance in relationship satisfaction using self-reports have been characterized as "invalid from a scientific standpoint" (Gottman, 1990, p. 79).

A fundamental task for the field is to show that any construct studied is not simply a proxy for relationship satisfaction. It is therefore useful to require that constructs studied do more than capture variance in commonly used measures of relationship satisfaction. A test of "surplus conceptual value" can be provided by controlling statistically the relationship satisfaction of both partners whenever two relationship variables are investigated lest any association between them simply reflect their status as proxies of relationship satisfaction

Some Unresolved Issues: Towards a Resolution

One or Many?

One response to the issues outlined above has been the attempt to develop multidimensional measures of relationships satisfaction. Perhaps the most well developed of these is the *Marital Satisfaction Inventory* (MSI, Snyder, 1997). This measure includes a validity scale that attempts to provide a control for socially desirable responses, a global distress scale comprising items that tap the individual's overall dissatisfaction with the marriage, and nine scales assessing different dimensions of marital interaction (e.g., time together, disagreement about finances, sexual dissatisfaction). This psychometrically sophisticated instrument offers a profile of relationship satisfaction much like the MMPI offers a profile of individual functioning and, like the MMPI, offers actuarial data to assist in its interpretation. Unfortunately, the potential it offers for providing a more comprehensive picture of relationship satisfaction through profile analysis has not been realized perhaps because of its length (150 items).

More importantly, the MSI accords one of its dimensions a special status in that the global distress scale is a criterion against which the remaining dimensions are validated. Hence

items that tap overall evaluations of the marriage are used to interpret the validity of items that assess various domains of the marriage. This is consistent with a pervasive tendency in the literature to favor global evaluations of the marriage, a preference that is not often explicitly discussed. Thus, for example, a single item in the MAT that assesses "marital happiness" is heavily weighted so that it accounts for 22% of the total possible test score. However, if all the items in the test were weighted equally it would only account for 6.6% of the total possible score

Not surprisingly, a second response to the circumstances described earlier has been to define relationship satisfaction as subjective, global evaluations of the relationship (e.g., Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Norton, 1983). The strength of this approach is its conceptual simplicity as it avoids the problem of interpretation that arises in many omnibus measures of marital quality. Because it has a clear cut interpretation, this approach allows the antecedents, correlates, and consequences of relationship satisfaction to be examined in a straightforward manner.

One criticism of this approach is the view that unidimensional, global scales "often do not provide much information beyond the fact that a couple is distressed" (Fowers, 1990, p. 370). However, the same is true of the most widely used scales of relationship satisfaction, the MAT and DAS. It therefore appears that any attempt to advance understanding of relationship satisfaction will have to offer a significant advantage over the MAT and DAS in order to overcome the familiarity bias that has developed concerning these two measures. The conceptual clarity and ease of measuring subjective, global evaluation of the relationship does so, suggesting that it replace the MAT and DAS in marital research. In the event that this standard is adopted, it will be important to re-examine accepted correlates of marital satisfaction to show that they do not represent spurious findings.

Variation on a Theme or Something New?

The attempt to conceptualize relationship satisfaction as a global evaluation of the relationship has focused on a bipolar conceptualization with dissatisfaction reflecting an

evaluation of the relationship in which negative features are salient and positive features are relatively absent, and satisfaction reflecting an evaluation in which positive features are salient and negative features are relatively absent. But this view has been challenged on the basis that positive and negative evaluations in marriage can be conceptualized and measured as separate, though related, dimensions (Fincham, Beach, & Kemp-Fincham, 1997). Data obtained with a simple measure used to capture this two-dimensional conception of relationship satisfaction indicate that the dimensions have different correlates and account for unique variance in reported marital behaviors and attributions independently of individual affect. More importantly, the “surplus conceptual value” test was met as these findings held even when MAT scores were statistically controlled. Moreover, two groups of wives who were indistinguishable on MAT scores, those who were high in positivity and high in negativity (ambivalent wives) versus those who were low in positivity and low in negativity (indifferent wives), differed reliably in their behaviors and attributions (Fincham & Linfield, 1997).

This viewpoint may seem to be a variation on the previous theme of unidimensional vs. multidimensional approaches to relationships satisfaction. On the other hand, it appears to be something new in that it alone in the field retains the advantage of the theoretical clarity found in the unidimensional, global evaluation perspective outlined in the last section while also capturing the advantages of a multidimensional approach. In addition, it has the clear advantage of allowing us to make distinctions that are not afforded by unidimensional measures and thereby open new areas of inquiry. For example, it allows study not only of happy (high in positivity and low in negativity) and unhappy spouses (low in positivity and high in negativity) but also ambivalent spouses (high in positivity and in negativity) and indifferent spouses (high in positivity and in negativity) two groups that have not received attention in prior research.

It also opens new avenues of inquiry in longitudinal research on marriage. For instance, it would be theoretically important if happily married spouses first increased negative evaluations

only (became ambivalent) before then decreasing positive evaluations and becoming distressed, as compared to a progression in which negative evaluations increased and positive evaluations decreased at the same time. Such progressions may, in turn, differ in important ways from one where there is simply a decline in positive evaluations over time. Documenting the existence of different avenues of change in marital quality, examining their determinants, and exploring their consequences suggests a program of research that may do much to advance our understanding of how marriages succeed and fail.

Snapshot or Movie?

A recent important development is the notion that relationship satisfaction is appropriately conceptualized not as a judgment made at a single time point but as a trajectory that reflects fluctuations in satisfaction over time. Such a trajectory can be computed for individual partners and parameters of the trajectory, especially its slope, or rate of change, can be examined in relation to other variables of interest. From this perspective, relationship satisfaction at one point in time cannot be fully understood without reference to earlier or later data points. So, for example, a score of 105 on the MAT has a different meaning depending on whether the person scored 115 or 85 five months earlier. This approach has the advantage of fostering multi-wave longitudinal research on relationships (two-wave longitudinal designs have dominated; see Karney & Bradbury, 1995), and encourages researchers to specify a model of marital change (two-wave longitudinal designs assume a simple linear model). Use of this approach to conceptualizing and understanding relationship satisfaction is increasing and has the potential to provide more a more refined picture of relationship satisfaction.

Enough: Will the Real Relationship Satisfaction Please Stand Up!

Confronted by various views of relationship satisfaction, it is tempting to want to identify the “real” relationship satisfaction. However, any attempt to identify the “real” meaning of relationship satisfaction is ultimately self defeating. Instead, researchers are confronted by a

situation analogous to that captured by the story of the blind men and the elephant. Each man describes what he can feel as an elephant and each is correct with the totality of the descriptions providing a more complete picture than any single description or any subset of descriptions. Similarly, there are several options available for understanding relationship satisfaction and each, when precisely specified, has merit. For example, the rich, multidimensional picture provided by the MSI is clearly more valuable to the couple counselor than knowing the summary score on a unidimensional measure comprising global evaluations of the relationship.

In essence, unresolved issues as to the nature of relationship satisfaction can be resolved not by pitting different perspectives on relationship satisfaction against each other but by careful specification of their referents and the purposes for which they may be most suited. For instance, if one's purpose is to simply distinguish satisfied couples from couples who might need marital counseling standard measures of couple satisfaction (e.g., MAT, DAS) are perfectly appropriate and their inclusion of a heterogeneous set of items might even give them an edge *for this purpose* over measures that consist solely of global evaluation of the relationship. In contrast, more homogenous measures are clearly advantageous in theoretically driven research on the correlates of relationship satisfaction.

The New Frontier: Continuum or Category?

Research on relationship satisfaction has ignored a fundamental question that can be asked of many psychological constructs. For example, when we speak of depression we commonly distinguish between symptoms of depression and the syndrome of depression. A basic issue in this field is whether there are cutting points between qualitatively distinct categories that reflect “upset/distress or life dissatisfaction” and “disorder/ psychopathology.” In an analogous manner, family psychologists are now beginning to ask whether we can show that the “manifestations of marital disorder tend to cluster or aggregate in recognizable patterns in the same way that the symptoms of individual psychiatric disorders cluster in identifiable syndromes” (First et al., 2002,

p. 163). Simply stated does relationship satisfaction reflect an underlying continuum or are there discontinuities in satisfaction?

Why is it important to understand the underlying structure of relationship satisfaction? First, the underlying structure has implications for the plausibility of linear vs. non-linear models in the study of relationships. Non-linear models often imply discontinuities and if a continuous dimension underlies scores of relationship satisfaction it might be taken as a strike against such theories. Second, dichotomizing a variable that could legitimately be treated as a continuous variable has the same effect on power as discarding more than a third of one's sample (Cohen, 1983). If there is no evidence of distinct categories of relationship satisfaction, dichotomizing data as is often done in marital research is wasteful and has the potential to lead to type two errors. Third, if there is no point of discontinuity in relationship satisfaction, one may question the validity of the distinction between therapy participants who have "recovered" and those who have not "recovered" following couple therapy. Accordingly, there are both theoretical and practical reasons to address the latent structure of relationship satisfaction.

Why Might One Expect Relationship Satisfaction to be Well Represented as a Single, Continuous Dimension?

Reports of marital dissatisfaction appear to be linked to a dimension of individual negative affectivity (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1997). Likewise, the intra-individual changes produced by interaction patterns are well modeled as a linear effect over time (Karney & Bradbury, 1997). In addition, external life events influence level of satisfaction (Story & Bradbury, 2004). Accordingly, to the extent that variations in environmental events reflect a continuum of severity they might be expected to stretch out the range of marital satisfaction scores in a relatively continuous manner. As a result of these influences, one might expect a fine gradation of different levels of satisfaction with no point of discontinuity or categorical differences.

Because traits like neuroticism and negative affectivity represent subtle gradations of responsiveness to rewards or punishments, one might anticipate that the association between neuroticism and reported marital satisfaction would lead to a relatively continuous distribution of marital satisfaction scores in the general population. One might also expect marital satisfaction to reflect a continuum structure based on the broader literature regarding positive and negative affective reactions to events. If change in individual relationship satisfaction is related to perceptions of movement toward or away from important relationship or individual goals (e.g. Fincham & Beach, 1999), relationship distress could be viewed as feedback that goals are being met by the relationship, or conversely, that the relationship is blocking important individual goals. Because rate of progress toward important relationship goals may be quite variable, and behavior in the service of goal attainment might be expected to require continuous adjustment, one might again expect a relatively continuous distribution of relationship satisfaction scores to result from such influences. Accordingly, there are a variety of empirical and theoretical considerations that would lead to the expectation that relationship satisfaction and distress is well represented as a continuum only.

Why Might One Expect Relationship Satisfaction to be Categorical Rather than a Single Continuous Dimension?

There are also, however, good reasons to expect discontinuity in relationship satisfaction. It has, for example, been known for some time that happy couples tend to overestimate positive qualities and underestimate negative qualities of partners whereas unhappy couples tend to do the opposite (e.g. Murray, 1999). Indeed, attributional models of marital discord suggest that there are interpretive differences between couples that result in deterioration in marital satisfaction over time (see Fincham, 2001).

Biases in perception or interpretation, whether viewed as motivated or as merely a byproduct of cognitive architecture, suggest the strong possibility that relatively subtle

differences in initial biases could feed back on themselves, becoming exaggerated over time to create increasing divergence between happy and unhappy couples. In particular, one might anticipate that couples with negative biases could find themselves drawn inexorably into an increasingly negative view of the partner whereas couples with more positive biases would find that they can readily explain away even those characteristics and behaviors that others might view as the “faults” of their partner (Murray, 1999). As a result, relatively minor initial differences in marital satisfaction could become exaggerated over time leading to a bimodal distribution of outcomes.

As previously noted, marital interaction research also indicates that some couples are characterized by an increased likelihood of responding to a negative partner behavior with a negative behavior of their own (see Fincham & Beach, 1999; Gottman, 1999; Weiss & Heyman, 1997). This creates the potential for a behavioral feedback loop resulting in long chains of negative behavior. If these chains of negative behavior set the stage for further negative interaction in the future there is the potential for “causal loops” of the sort that are characteristic of close relationships (Kelley, Berscheid, Christensen, et al., 1983, p. 58-62). Accordingly, some partners may become increasingly negative in their feelings toward each other as a function of their own internal couple dynamics without further influence from individual or external characteristics. At a minimum, these dynamics suggest the potential for some couples to “become stuck” in a negative pattern of interaction from which they find it very difficult to exit. This is a primary characteristic of any proposed “marital disorder” (First et al., 2002). That is, there is the potential for well documented interactional patterns to lead to a distinct “types” of marital satisfaction over time.

Consistent with the hypothesis of two distinct populations, Gottman (1994) discussed the possibility that rather continuous changes in the nature of a couple’s interaction (p-space) could be related to an underlying discrete change in their perception of the partner (q-space). Such a

discontinuity in perception of the partner and the associated felt well-being about the relationship would seem to require that categories underlie the distribution of marital satisfaction scores. This perspective is further elaborated in the non-linear dynamical perspective espoused by Gottman et al. (2002) and leads to the expectation that there will be some evidence of categories in marital satisfaction scores among couples who have been married for several years.

How Can the Continuum –Category Issue be Addressed?

Taxometric procedures (Waller & Meehl, 1998) have been developed to address the question of whether psychological constructs are best characterized as being dimensional only, or whether there is evidence of a latent categorical structure superimposed on the dimension of interest. If there is evidence of a latent categorical structure, the members of the group of interest are identified as members of the “taxon” and others are identified as members of the “complement.” These procedures provide a set of tools to examine the underlying structure of relationship satisfaction.

Beach et al. (2004) used taxometric methods to analyze data from 447 couples in early marriage who had lived together for an average of 4.5 years. Using the MAT they found evidence of a discontinuity in marital satisfaction scores such that approximately 20% of the sample experience marriage in a way that is qualitatively and not merely quantitatively different than their peers. They also showed that taxon and complement members differed on a number of relationship variables and that taxon membership moderated the contribution of leisure activities and negative partner behavior to satisfaction scores as measured by the Multi-dimensional Satisfaction Scale (MDS; Kearns & Leonard, in press). The association for negative behavior was greater among the complement members than among members of the taxon (-.547 vs. -.445), conversely, the simple association for leisure activities was smaller for members of the complement than for members of the taxon (.251 vs. .595). Thus, not only were the two groups

different on a range of marital variables, but they also appeared to show a different pattern of connections among marital variables.

To conclude, it is noteworthy that this attempt to study the underlying structure of relationship satisfaction differs dramatically from prior efforts which have assumed an underlying continuum and have attempted to identify clusters of items that group together using such techniques as factor analysis. Early on factor analytic approaches gave rise to the conclusion that "different operations designed to measure marital satisfaction converge and form one dimension" (Gottman, 1979, p. 5) a viewpoint supported by subsequent work that shows standard measures of relationship satisfaction intercorrelate highly (e.g., Heyman et al., 1994). With taxometric research on relationship satisfaction having only just begun, the jury is still out on whether relationship satisfaction is taxonic. Hopefully, it will not be too long before similarly strong conclusions to those just cited can be drawn about its taxonic nature (or lack thereof). If relationship satisfaction proves to be taxonic it will open up a new era of research in which it will be necessary to document correlates and consequences of taxon membership, the developmental trajectory of taxon members and so on.

Conclusion

Romantic relationships do not invariably provide the benefits spouses hope and long for and in Western societies the hedonic impact of this reality has been given a privileged position. As a result, a long and productive history of research has emerged on relationship satisfaction and its correlates. Primary among the findings in this research is clear evidence that relationship satisfaction is linked to problems in individual mental and physical health. It is also clear that a number of features characterize distressed couples, and research has moved on to address the more difficult problem of identifying reliable antecedents of marital dissatisfaction. Recent research and theory emphasize the utility of examining relationships in context and of studying both positive and negative aspects of the relationship. When this is done, it becomes clear that

positive and negative aspects of relationships are not merely different ends of a bipolar dimension. Rather, they have the potential to interact in important ways to enrich our understanding of couple functioning. Finally, researchers have begun to take on the fundamental question of whether couples can be “categorized” as distressed or non-distressed.

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