

[in press, May 2006, in: In R. F. Baumeister & K. D. Vohs (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.]

Emily A. Stone and Todd K. Shackelford
Florida Atlantic University

Marital Satisfaction

Definition

Marital satisfaction is a mental state that reflects the perceived benefits and costs of marriage to a particular person. The more costs a marriage partner inflicts on a person, the less satisfied one generally is with the marriage and with the marriage partner. Similarly, the greater the perceived benefits, the more satisfied one is with the marriage and with the marriage partner.

Components and Mechanisms of Marital Satisfaction

Cognition

In perceiving whether a spouse's behavior is costly or beneficial, cognitions, or thoughts about the behavior, are important. If one's spouse performs a negative (costly) behavior, this may be attributed either to characteristics of their spouse (for example, they are lazy), or instead to circumstances surrounding their spouse's behavior (for example, it was an especially taxing day at work, and they don't feel like making dinner). In the case of marital satisfaction, attributing costly behavior to characteristics of one's spouse, rather than to circumstances surrounding their behavior, is associated with decreased marital satisfaction, as well as marital deterioration. These "maladaptive attributions" occur more often with negative behaviors in marital problem-solving discussions, and these attributions do not appear to be a result of either partner being depressed, having a neurotic personality, or tending toward physical aggression. The way people interpret behavior appears to be related to how satisfied they are with their marriage.

Intimately related to an individual's thoughts about behaviors are the individual's feelings about behaviors, or affect. Research on affect and marital satisfaction is not entirely conclusive yet; some studies have shown that negative affect is related to decreased marital satisfaction, whereas others have shown it has no effect or even increases it. Future research needs to clarify more specifically how negative affect is related to marital satisfaction.

Physiology

There is a well-established relationship between being married and maintaining physical well-being. This, in the most immediate sense, is established by the physiological functioning of the two married individuals. Recent research has indicated that married couples who are more satisfied with their relationship also exhibit greater synchrony among their physiological systems, compared to those married couples who are less satisfied. That is, maritally satisfied couples are more likely to maintain synchrony among each partner's electrodermal (or electrical resistance of the skin) and heart rate systems, which may be a mechanism by which married couples maintain greater physical well-being than unmarried individuals.

Interaction Patterns

Patterns of interaction between spouses can affect how satisfied they are with their marriage. The pattern most often related to marital dissatisfaction is one of demand/withdrawal. In this pattern, one partner (often the wife) criticizes or nags the other about change, while the other partner (usually the husband) evades the confrontation and discussion. It operates such that initial criticism leads to disengagement, which leads to further confrontation and even further disengagement. This pattern has clear implications for marital satisfaction, with both parties developing dissatisfaction.

Social Support

Another component of satisfaction within a marriage is the degree of social support for each of the partners and for the relationship. Support processes are reliably associated with good marital functioning, as well as with healthful outcomes within families. Marriage partners who provide good social support for their spouse contribute to their spouse's marital satisfaction.

Violence

Physical violence also is closely linked with marital satisfaction. Individuals involved in physically abusive relationships are more likely to be dissatisfied with their marriage than are individuals not involved in abusive relationships. Escalation to physical violence can result from many factors, two of which include alcohol use and level of income. And somewhat surprisingly, some form of physical aggression is present in 57% of newlywed marriages, indicating that the relationship between violence and marital satisfaction may not be as straightforward as is often presumed.

Contextual Factors in Marital Satisfaction

Many factors enter into assessments of marital satisfaction: a spouse's personality, their likelihood of infidelity, performance of mate guarding behaviors, the desirability of each partner, and the presence of children. If one partner perceives that the other is inflicting costs (or being troublesome) in these domains, they may move to address them through discussions with their partner, or by seeking a new or additional partner who may better suit them.

Marital Satisfaction and Spousal Personality Characteristics

How satisfied a person is with their marriage seems to be related to, in part, the personality characteristics of their spouse. Personality is often gauged by five dimensions, including *urgency* (dominance, extraversion vs. submissiveness, introversion), *agreeableness* (warm, trusting vs. cold, suspicious), *conscientiousness* (reliable, well-organized vs.

undependable, disorganized), *emotional stability* (secure, even-tempered vs. nervous, temperamental) and *openness/intellect* (perceptive, curious vs. imperceptive, uncurious). Marital dissatisfaction is most often related to a spouse's emotional instability, but dissatisfaction is also related to having a partner who is low in conscientiousness, low in agreeableness, and low in openness/intellect. People married to someone with these personality characteristics often complain that their spouses are neglectful, dependent, possessive, condescending, jealous, unfaithful, unreliable, emotionally constricted, self-centered, sexualizing of others, and abusive of alcohol. Thus, the personality characteristics of each spouse contribute greatly to the relationship culminating in satisfying marriage, or its ending in divorce.

Marital Satisfaction and Spousal Mate Guarding

Even after finding a suitable partner and forming a lasting relationship, challenges associated with maintaining that relationship ensue. Men and women often attempt to prevent another person from encroaching on their marriage by performing mate guarding behaviors. Some of these behaviors can actually inflict costs on the spouse, and consequently, are related to lessened marital satisfaction. These mate guarding behaviors include monopolizing the partner's time (for example, she spent all of her free time with him so he could not meet other women), threatening or punishing infidelity (for example, he hit her when he caught her flirting with someone else), and being emotionally manipulative (for example, she threatened to harm herself if he ever left). Marriages in which one or both partners frequently perform these costly guarding behaviors are more often dissatisfied marriages.

Marital Satisfaction and Spousal Susceptibility to Infidelity

Being unfaithful can unmistakably cause problems in marriages. Discovered infidelities raise issues of honesty, trust between the partners, commitment and, ultimately, love. Because a

spouse's infidelity has the potential to inflict these emotional costs, marital satisfaction appears to be negatively related to the likelihood that a spouse will be unfaithful. That is, the more likely one's partner is to be unfaithful, the less satisfied one is with their marriage and their marriage partner.

Marital Satisfaction and Mate Value

Mate value can be thought of as the desirability of a partner, a composite of a variety of characteristics including physical attractiveness, intelligence, and personality. Marriages in which there is a discrepancy between the partners in mate value are marriages in which both partners are more likely to be unfaithful, signaling marital dissatisfaction. When a husband, for example, is perceived as having a higher mate value than his wife, he, as well as she (perhaps for retaliatory reasons), is more likely to be unfaithful to their marriage. The lower marital satisfaction associated with this contextual marital difficulty, of differing mate values between the partners, appears as an indicator to the higher mate value individual that they might seek a better-matched partner elsewhere.

Marital Satisfaction and Children

The introduction of a child drastically changes the marital context. Marital satisfaction is influenced by, and has influences upon, children. The presence of children in a marriage has the paradoxical effect of increasing the stability of the marriage (when the children are young, at least), while simultaneously decreasing marital satisfaction. That is, parenthood makes a marriage less happy but more likely to last. In addition, marital strife, an indicator of dissatisfaction, has been shown to factor into the well-functioning differences between children who come from divorced homes and children who do not.

Marital Satisfaction and Additional Factors

Additionally, family background factors, such as the relationship satisfaction of one's parents' marriage, are related to marital satisfaction in an individual's current marriage. Perhaps surprisingly, parental marital *satisfaction* seems to be more closely related to one's own present marital satisfaction than one's parents' divorce. Adult attachment styles also are related to marital satisfaction, in that securely attached adults are more often satisfied in their marriage than are those individuals who are avoidant or anxiously ambivalently attached. Some circumstances, like traumatic events (for example, hurricanes, or testicular cancer), appear to actually strengthen marital satisfaction. Stressors in economic or work-related realms often contribute to decreased marital satisfaction, however. For example, displaying negative affect in marital relationships has been shown to be more frequent among blue-collar, rather than white-collar employees.

Marital satisfaction, in addition to verbal aggression and conflict frequency, appears also to be related to the performance of joint religious activities (like praying together) and to perceptions of the sacredness of their relationship. And although not a direct measure of marital satisfaction, but replete with implications, the presence of available alternative partners in one's environment is related to a greater likelihood of divorce.

Marital Satisfaction over Time

One component of marital satisfaction is an understanding of the factors that influence it presently, a sort of "snapshot" of it, but it's also important to understand how these factors play a role in its development over time.

Marital satisfaction was once believed to follow a U-shaped trajectory over time, such that couples began their marriages satisfied, this satisfaction somewhat waned over the years, but resurfaced to newlywed levels after many years together. This was found to be the case in studies

with cross-sectional data, where marital satisfaction was assessed once, drawn from participants with a variety of ages, but is now actually better understood by following the marital satisfaction trajectory of particular couples over the years. It now seems that, on average, marital satisfaction drops markedly over the first 10 years, and continues to gradually decrease over the subsequent decades. There are individual differences in the path that marital satisfaction follows over time, however, as not all marital satisfaction decreases in a linear way (a slow, steady decrease), but may include more dramatic decreases at times, or may even increase. One study found a minority of couples in their sample reported increasing levels of marital satisfaction over time.

To date, the many contextual variables mentioned above, like the presence of children, mate value discrepancies, and likelihood of infidelity, in conjunction with particular personality characteristics of the marriage partners, most notably neuroticism and emotional stability, have been identified as contributors to the general decrease in marital satisfaction over time.

Measuring Marital Satisfaction

Assessing marital satisfaction in research is often done through self-report surveys, in which participants respond to a variety of questions assessing their satisfaction with different facets of their marriage. It is important to note that the concept of marital satisfaction is not necessarily gauged by assessing a lack of *dissatisfaction* in the relationship; factors that lead to marital distress are not necessarily the inverse of factors that promote satisfying relationships. Factors that promote healthy relationships and are present in satisfying, long-term marriages are important to consider, as well. Thus, thorough measures of marital satisfaction assess qualities that contribute negatively, as well as uniquely positively, to the marriage.

SEE ALSO Big Five; Close relationships; love; happiness

Emily A. Stone and Todd K. Shackelford

Further Readings

Bradbury, T. N., Fincham, F. D., & Beach, S. R. H. (2000). Research on the nature and determinants of marital satisfaction: A decade in review. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 964-980.

Buss, D. M. (2003). *The evolution of desire* (rev. ed.). New York: Basic Books.

Buss, D. M., & Shackelford, T. K. (1997). Susceptibility to infidelity in the first year of marriage. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 31, 193-221.

Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (1997). Neuroticism, marital interaction, and the trajectory of marital satisfaction. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72, 1075-1092.

Shackelford, T. K., & Buss, D. M. (2000). Marital satisfaction and spousal cost-infliction. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 28, 917-928.