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The Effects of Gratitude on Overall Marital Happiness at the Dyadic and Individual Levels

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Introduction

The negative aspects of marriage such as divorce, power, and anger have been the most widely researched topics within the marital field. The role of positives within a marital relationship, however, have received much less attention from researchers. The present study will be focusing on the positives within a marriage rather than the negatives. The study will look at the role of gratitude in marriage with particular attention to how gratitude will affect the individual's experience of his or her marriage. This represents a response to the growing need in developing theories of positivism within the marital field (Gordon & Baucom, in press).

The primary focus of marital interventions has been on ineffective communication processes, conflict, and major positive events. Major positive events could be described as a promotion at work, news of a baby, or anything that creates intense emotion. Although all are important for marital change, intervention can also be utilized in the everyday moments of a couple's life (Driver & Gottman, 2004). Driver and Gottman designed a model which states that by improving daily life within a marriage the couple will improve conflict discussions, communication, and major positive events. The researchers predicted that everyday moments may contribute to marital satisfaction (Driver & Gottman, 2004). Fredrickson (2001) suggested that positive affect is cultivated over time. Driver and Gottman (2004) believed this held true for marital interactions as well. To date, however, nobody has examined the ways that gratitude may contribute to positive daily experiences in marriage.

Another predictor for marital satisfaction is positive sentiment which can be described as perceiving the partner in a more positive light than is evident by observed behavior (Story, Berg, Smith, Beveridge, Henry, & Pearce 2007). Such positive appraisals are more likely to occur in couples characterized by high marital satisfaction (Story et al, 2007). Couples with greater

marital satisfaction also seem to rely on these positive expectancies when receiving negative information during a problem solving discussion and, as a result, respond positively to negative feedback from spouses (Story et al, 2007). For example, if a husband is home late from work instead of the wife reacting negatively to this she could instead see him in the most positive light and attribute the lateness to working extra hard to support their family. Positive sentiment has also been closely linked with optimism (Story et al, 2007). This is important because Raikkonen, Matthews, Flory, Owens, and Gump (1999) examined the relationship among optimism, pessimism, and perceived negativity of interpersonal interactions and found that optimists experienced fewer negative interactions and felt more positively about them.

Thus, past research has established that positives are important and worthy of attention in a marital relationship. The current study examines the positive emotion of gratitude and its effects on an individual's marital happiness. Gratitude has been defined as "the willingness to recognize the unearned increments of value in one's experience" (Emmons & McCullough, 2003 p. 377), and "an estimate of gain coupled with the judgment that someone else is responsible for that gain" (Emmons & McCullough, 2003 p. 377). But who is it that experiences these feelings of gratitude? Do some individuals have predispositions towards grateful experiences? And if so, how might that enhance their marital satisfaction?

Rosenberg (1998) believed that gratitude can be defined as an affective trait. She defined affective traits as "stable predispositions towards certain types of emotional responding" that "set the threshold for the occurrence of particular emotional states" (p. 249). There is a "grateful disposition" that may reduce people's threshold for experiencing grateful emotions (McCullough, Tsang, & Emmons 2004). People who score highly on measures of gratitude as an affective trait tend to experience a high degree of life satisfaction and positive affects such as

happiness, vitality, and hope (McCullough et al, 2004). They also scored higher on measures of prosocial behavior, empathy, forgiveness, religiousness, and spirituality (McCullough et al, 2004).

So what exactly do these findings mean? When examining a marital relationship it is predicted that higher levels of gratitude will be associated with higher levels of support, happiness, and intimacy. For example, if a wife tends to experience a lot of gratitude in her life, she is more likely to notice and be grateful for positive attributes in her husband. Because she is positively affected by this gratitude, she will more likely experience a high degree of happiness in her marriage. Thus, this investigation aims to clarify whether and how gratitude may relate to marital happiness.

Specific Objective

The specific objective of this study is to investigate how gratitude affects an individual in their relationship. Therefore, the current study seeks to test a number of hypotheses. First, it is expected that individuals who experience gratitude for their spouse will report higher levels of relationship happiness. Second, those who report experiencing gratitude are expected to be more likely to report expressing gratitude to their spouse. Third, individuals with higher levels of felt gratitude are expected to engage in altruistic and supportive behaviors toward their partner. Finally, individuals who consistently express gratitude on a daily basis are expected to experience higher degrees of intimacy in their marriage.

Justification

Examining gratitude in marriage is very important to the field of psychology. Prior research on marriage in psychology has been focused on the negatives such as infidelity, abuse,

anger, and divorce. Driver and Gottman (2004) suggested that psychology as a science has focused predominately on healing the damage that life creates. Although this focus is important, they suggest that it is limited in its ability to enhance the necessary positive qualities for a thriving individual or relationship (Driver & Gottman, 2004). Thus this study is a step toward advancing knowledge about positivity in marriage that may one day aid researchers and clinicians in developing a more clear understanding of how to help couples achieve and maintain high states of relationship satisfaction.

Methods

Participants

Data will be collected from approximately 50 married couples recruited from a community sample.

Measures

Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI – Funk & Rogge, 2007). The Couples Satisfaction Index will be used to determine the level of relationship satisfaction. A Likert type scale will be used for this ranging from “0 equals extremely unhappy” to “6 equals perfect”. An example of a statement that will be used in this scale is “My relationship with my partner makes me happy.”

Autonomy and Relatedness Inventory (ARI - Schaefer, Edgerton, & Burnett, 1991). The 30 item Autonomy and Relatedness Inventory will be used to determine the level of autonomy and relatedness between the couple. A Likert type scale will be used for this ranging from “1 equals not at all” to “5 equals very much”. An example of a statement that will be used in this scale is “My partner makes me feel like I can tell him/her anything”.

Big Five-10 (BFI – John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991). The 10 item Big Five will be used as an individual personality inventory. The Big Five Inventory measures openness,

conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism, and extraversion. A Likert type scale will be used for this ranging from “1 equals disagree strongly” to “5 equals agree strongly”. Examples of statements that will be used in this scale are “I see myself as one whom is reserved” and “I see myself as one whom is generally trusting”.

Positive and Negative Affectivity Schedule (PANAS – Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988).

The PANAS will be used to measure positive and negative affectivity. This scale asks participants to rate on a Likert type scale (ranging from “1 = very slightly or not at all” to “5 = extremely”) how much they feel that a variety of words (e.g. irritable, afraid, inspired, enthusiastic, etc.) describes them.

Gratitude Questionnaire – 6 (GQ-6 - McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang 2002). The GQ-6 will be used to determine the level of gratitude that each individual feels. A Likert type scale will be used for this ranging from “1 equals strongly disagree” to “5 equals strongly agree”. An example of a statement from this scale is “I have so much in my life to be thankful for.”

Daily Diary. Daily Diary methodology will be used for fourteen days with the couples. Each spouse will separately call UNCW’s Marital Studies Lab daily and complete the questionnaires via voice prompts programmed using Voiceguide software. A Likert type scale will be used for this ranging from “1 equals strongly disagree” to “5 equals strongly agree”. The participants will type in a number on the key pad of the phone after hearing certain statements. The statements will include items like “My partner does several things throughout the day to show me he/she appreciates me” and “I felt thankful for my spouse today.”

Description

This project will be a scientific report that is a product from working in a marital studies lab.

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