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Areas of Marital Dissatisfaction Among Long-Term Couples

Jill D. Duba, Aaron W. Hughey, Tracy Lara,
and Monica G. Burke

To better understand relational dissatisfaction and duration of long-term married couples, this study surveyed 30 couples married at least 40 years with the Marital Satisfaction Inventory. Findings suggest various areas of dissatisfaction (e.g., affective communication, conflict over child rearing) and relationship among and link to other areas of dissatisfaction (e.g., finances, sex).

Most research on marriage focuses on either the dissolution of the relationship or marital satisfaction among couples recently married or married within the last 20 years (Bachand & Caron, 2001; Rosen-Grandon, Myers, & Hattie, 2004). Little has been conducted on the areas of dissatisfaction and difficulties facing long-standing couples (Henry, Miller, & Giarrusso, 2005). This article summarizes the results of a study that identified relationships among factors and areas of dissatisfaction as reported by couples who have been married 40 years or more. Suggestions for brief interventions as well as further research are provided based on the information gleaned from this study. First, we present a brief discussion related to the definition and factors associated with marital satisfaction and marital duration.

SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH

Cherlin (2005) stated that “marriage is more prevalent in the United States than in nearly all other developed Western nations” (p. 43). Although it appears that Americans like to be married, almost half of all marriages in the United States end in divorce (Pieper Webb et al., 2010). Despite the limited research, several studies have examined what actually keeps couples together and suggested that marital satisfaction, intimacy, and shared religious faith have been linked with marital duration and stability (Bachand & Caron, 2001; Henry et al., 2005; Roizblatt et al., 1999).

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Sperry (2010) defined marital satisfaction as how partners meet each other's expectations. Furthermore, researchers have attempted to identify categories or attitudes related to marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction has been linked to various factors including friendship, companionship, love, commitment, similarity, stability, and togetherness (Bachand & Caron, 2001; Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999). Still other factors include loyalty, trust, moral values, respect, patience, and forgiveness (Bryant, Conger, & Meehan, 2001; Fenell, 1993; Fincham & Beach, 2002; Robinson, 1994; Roizblatt et al., 1999). Additionally, communication and coping strategies have been linked to marital satisfaction (Bodenmann & Shantinath, 2004; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999). Couples who engage in the following behaviors during particularly stressful and difficult times tend to move out of those experiences successfully: positive interpretations of marital transgressions, correctly perceiving how one's spouse is feeling about something, and responding empathetically toward each other (Fields, 1983; Fincham, Paleari, & Regalia, 2002). Furthermore, couples who are able to positively reframe situations, constructively engage with each other (rather than withdraw or engage in violent behaviors), and effectively use optimism during stressful situations tend to be happier and more stable than those who do not use such coping strategies (Ptacek & Dodge, 1995; Whiting & Crane, 2003). It follows that maintenance behaviors, such as positivity, openness, assurances, and networking, have been found to contribute to the duration of the marriage (Canary & Stafford, 1992; Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999). Although it remains unclear if marriage duration is a function of marital satisfaction, examining the qualities and behaviors associated with marital satisfaction such as intimacy has served as the focus of research.

Various studies have confirmed a strong link between marital satisfaction and marital intimacy (Greeff & Malherbe, 2001; Kenny & Acitelli, 1987; Ng, Peluso, & Smith, 2010). Intimacy is a complex and multidimensional concept that includes emotional, mental, physical, sexual, spiritual, social, and intellectual components (Duba, 2010; Heller & Wood, 2000). Intimacy requires intrapersonal as well as interpersonal engagements. For example, the foundation of intimacy is set when partners are not only self-aware but also comfortable with self-disclosure. Intimacy is further generated when partners are self-differentiated, namely, when they can still experience closeness even when they are separated or when they are experiencing differences (Patrick, Sells, Giordano, & Tollerud, 2007; Sperry, 2010). Intimacy can be shared when partners reciprocally express empathy, acceptance, intensity, collaboration, and validation (Rampage, 1994). Finally, Duba (2010) suggested that intimate interactions (i.e., physical, sexual, social) also provide a medium from which to express commitment to each other.

Religious factors have been linked to the maintenance and promotion of marital satisfaction and longevity. Such factors may include attending religious activities, celebrating religious holidays, sharing friends and support among the

religious community, and sharing religious values and ideologies (Robinson, 1994; Vaaler, Ellison, & Powers, 2009). For example, Duba and Watts (2009) suggested that any given religion implies particular “rules” for couples to deal with various interpersonal and family issues (e.g., sexuality, parenting, and power). In some religions, separation and divorce are not permissible or looked on favorably (Lauer & Lauer, 1986). A triangular relationship with God has also been associated with marital stability, unity, motivation to continue to grow together, and peace and happiness. That is, in Goodman and Dollahite’s (2006) study, religious couples reported that God serves as an example of mercy, forgiveness, unconditional love, and patience. God also serves as a source of accountability. Feeling accountable toward God provides motivation for change or actions that lead to the betterment of the marriage. Finally, couples found God to be a resource, particularly in overcoming distress and in providing guidance.

Although marital satisfaction, intimacy, and shared religious faith have been linked with marital duration and stability, there is a paucity of literature associated with marital dissatisfaction among long-term married couples. The literature suggests that long-term couples tend to experience less distress in their marriage compared with younger couples (Henry et al., 2005). However, long-term couples still tackle relational disappointments and disagreements. The present investigation suggests various areas of dissatisfaction among couples who have been married 40 years or more, as well as the relationships among various areas of dissatisfaction linked to others.

METHOD

Participants

The total sample ($N = 62$) comprised 31 couples (31 men and 31 women) living in a southern midwestern city. Of these 62 participants, age data were not available for one male and one female participant. The men ($n = 30$) ranged in age from 60 to 88 years ($M = 72.63$ years, $SD = 7.59$). The women ($n = 30$) ranged in age from 60 to 86 years ($M = 70.80$ years, $SD = 7.10$). Pearson product–moment correlation revealed that the age of the men and women in the study was significantly related ($r = .96, p < .01$); that is, there was considerable consistency in the age of the couples. (Note that although .05 was used to determine statistical significance in the current study, we noted when the level of significance was observed to be .01 or greater.)

Procedure and Measures

Participation was solicited by advertising in the city newspaper and by referrals from church leaders in the community for potential participants (i.e., Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, and Catholic churches). The latter strategy yielded most of the participants. Couples interested in participating in the study were directed to contact the study’s investigator (first author). Interested couples

were sent an informed-consent document in a self-addressed stamped envelope to be returned to the investigator. Upon receiving the informed consent, we mailed the Marital Satisfaction Inventory (MSI) to the participants' home with a return self-addressed stamped envelope.

The Marital Satisfaction Inventory–Revised (MSI-R) was developed by Douglas K. Snyder (see Snyder, 1997, 2010) as a self-report instrument designed to provide a measure of relationship distress (Welfare, n.d.). It consists of 150 item pairs that make up 13 scales: Inconsistency, Conventionalization, Global Distress, Affective Communication, Problem-Solving Communication, Aggression, Time Together, Disagreement About Finances, Sexual Dissatisfaction, Role Orientation, Family History of Distress, Dissatisfaction With Children, and Conflict Over Child Rearing. Inconsistency and Conventionalization are validity scales and Global Distress is a global affective scale (Snyder, 2010). The inventory takes approximately 25 minutes to administer.

The MSI-R was originally normed in 1995 and 1996 on a representative sample of 1,020 couples who exhibited a diversity in age, educational background, and employment settings (Welfare, n.d.). Validity of the MSI-R was established by correlating scores obtained via its use with scores on the original MSI, which is generally considered to be valid and reliable (Boen, 1988; Snyder, Wills, & Keiser, 1981). With this approach, the criterion-related validity of the MSI-R has been demonstrated to be .955 (Welfare, n.d.). With respect to reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the individual scales on the MSI-R range from .70 to .93 (Welfare, n.d.); the overall alpha coefficient was found to be .82 (Snyder, 2010). An alpha coefficient of .70 or higher is generally considered acceptable for most social science research applications (Walker & Shostak, 2010).

Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) were calculated for men's and women's scores on each of the subscales of the MSI-R. We used *t* tests to determine if the observed difference between mean scores for men and women were statistically significant at the .05 level. We also computed Pearson product–moment correlation coefficients between each of the subscale scores for men and women to see if they were significant at the .05 level.

RESULTS

Conventionalization

Conventionalization and Inconsistency are the two validity scales on the MSI-R. Conventionalization consists of 10 items that are designed to assess the tendency of some test takers to distort their responses in a socially desirable direction (Snyder, 1997). Cronbach's alpha for women ($n = 31$) on the Conventionalization scale was .81; the alpha coefficient for men ($n = 31$) was .84. The mean score on this scale for women was 7.39 ($SD = 2.57$), whereas the mean score for men was 7.94 ($SD = 2.49$). The difference between these mean scores was not found to be significant at the .05 level, $t(60) = -0.85$, $p = .396$.

Pearson product–moment correlations revealed that women’s scores on the Conventionalism scale were significantly related to their scores on the Global Distress scale ($r = -.74, p < .01$), the Affective Communication scale ($r = -.80, p < .01$), the Problem-Solving Communication scale ($r = -.78, p < .01$), the Aggression scale ($r = -.55, p < .01$), the Time Together scale ($r = -.80, p < .01$), the Disagreement About Finances scale ($r = -.72, p < .01$), the Sexual Dissatisfaction scale ($r = -.58, p < .01$), and the Conflict Over Child Rearing scale ($r = -.66, p < .01$). All of these correlations were inverse, indicating that as scores on the Conventionalization scale tend to decrease, scores on each of the other scales tend to increase. For example, the less distortion respondents exhibited, the higher the distress reported on the corresponding scales. This is congruent with other research studies (e.g., Snyder, 2010), which have suggested that the higher the levels of negative affect and relationship conflict reported on other scales, the less likely respondents are to engage in idealistic or unrealistic positive terms.

Pearson product–moment correlations revealed that men’s scores on the Conventionalism scale were significantly related to their scores on the Global Distress scale ($r = -.73, p < .01$), the Affective Communication scale ($r = -.73, p < .01$), the Problem-Solving Communication scale ($r = -.66, p < .01$), the Aggression scale ($r = -.36, p < .05$), the Time Together scale ($r = -.74, p < .01$), the Disagreement About Finances scale ($r = -.56, p < .01$), the Sexual Dissatisfaction scale ($r = -.50, p < .01$), and the Family History of Distress scale ($r = -.54, p < .01$). Again, all of the significant correlations observed were inverse; that is, as scores on the Conventionalization scale tend to decrease, scores on each of the other scales tend to increase.

The relationship between scores on the Conventionalization Scale and the Conflict Over Child Rearing scale was significant for women but not for men. Similarly, the relationship between scores on the Conventionalization scale and the Family History of Distress scale was significant for men but not for women.

Note that Pearson product–moment correlation coefficients are not repetitive in the data presentation. For example, it is noted in this “Conventionalization” analysis summary section that scores for women on the Conventionalization scale are significantly related to their scores on the Global Distress scale ($r = -.74, p < .01$). This is not repeated in the “Global Distress” analysis summary section.

Global Distress

The Global Distress scale consists of 22 items that attempt to assess overall dissatisfaction with the marital relationship (Snyder, 2010). This scale reflects negative expectations regarding the relationship’s future, considering divorce or separation, as well as general unhappiness and unfavorable comparisons to other people’s intimate relationships. Cronbach’s alpha for women ($n = 31$) on the Global Distress scale was .86; the alpha coefficient for men ($n = 31$) was .86. The mean score on this scale for women was 1.13 ($SD = 2.41$), whereas the

mean score for men was 0.77 ($SD = 2.05$). The difference between these mean scores was not found to be significant at the .05 level, $t(60) = 0.63, p = .534$.

In addition to the significant relationships noted previously, Pearson product-moment correlations revealed that women's scores on the Global Distress scale were also significantly related to their scores on the Affective Communication scale ($r = .49, p < .01$), the Problem-Solving Communication scale ($r = .63, p < .01$), the Aggression scale ($r = .75, p < .01$), the Time Together scale ($r = .69, p < .01$), the Disagreement About Finances scale ($r = .88, p < .01$), the Sexual Dissatisfaction scale ($r = .47, p < .01$), and the Conflict Over Child Rearing scale ($r = .58, p < .01$). Men's scores on the Global Distress scale were also significantly related to their scores on the Affective Communication scale ($r = .75, p < .01$), the Problem-Solving Communication scale ($r = .72, p < .01$), the Time Together scale ($r = .87, p < .01$), the Disagreement About Finances scale ($r = .76, p < .01$), the Sexual Dissatisfaction scale ($r = .42, p < .05$), and the Family History of Distress scale ($r = .52, p < .01$).

The relationship between scores on the Global Distress scale and the Aggression and Conflict Over Child Rearing scales was significant for women but not for men. Similarly, the relationship between scores on the Global Distress scale and the Affective Communication and Family History of Distress scales was significant for men but not for women.

Affective Communication

The Affective Communication scale consists of 13 items designed to evaluate dissatisfaction with the level of affection and understanding expressed by one's partner; this scale is considered to be the best indicator of the experience of emotional intimacy (Snyder, 2010). Cronbach's alpha for women ($n = 31$) on this scale was .85; the alpha coefficient for men ($n = 31$) was .85. The mean score on this scale for women was 2.16 ($SD = 2.77$), whereas the mean score for men was 1.32 ($SD = 2.26$). The difference between these mean scores was not found to be significant at the .05 level, $t(60) = 1.31, p = .196$.

In addition to the significant relationships noted previously, Pearson product-moment correlations revealed that women's scores on the Affective Communication scale were also significantly related to their scores on the Problem-Solving Communication scale ($r = .74, p < .01$), the Time Together scale ($r = .69, p < .01$), the Disagreement About Finances scale ($r = .56, p < .01$), and the Sexual Dissatisfaction scale ($r = .48, p < .01$). Men's scores on the Affective Communication scale were also significantly related to their scores on the Problem-Solving Communication scale ($r = .86, p < .01$), the Time Together scale ($r = .70, p < .01$), the Disagreement About Finances scale ($r = .78, p < .01$), and the Sexual Dissatisfaction scale ($r = .51, p < .01$). The significant correlations noted here were the same for women and men.

Problem-Solving Communication

The Problem-Solving Communication scale consists of 19 items designed to measure a couple's perception of their inability to effectively resolve differences,

as well as overt discord (Snyder, 2010). Cronbach's alpha for women ($n = 31$) on the scale was .87; the alpha coefficient for men ($n = 31$) was .82. The mean score on this scale for women was 3.06 ($SD = 3.61$), whereas the mean score for men was 2.61 ($SD = 3.08$). The difference between these mean scores was not found to be significant at the .05 level, $t(60) = 0.53, p = .599$.

In addition to the significant relationships noted previously, Pearson product-moment correlations revealed that women's scores on the Problem-Solving Communication scale were also significantly related to their scores on the Aggression scale ($r = .62, p < .01$), the Time Together scale ($r = .56, p < .01$), the Disagreement About Finances scale ($r = .64, p < .01$), and the Sexual Dissatisfaction scale ($r = .40, p < .05$). Men's scores on the Problem-Solving Communication scale were also significantly related to their scores on the Time Together scale ($r = .62, p < .01$) and the Sexual Dissatisfaction scale ($r = .45, p < .01$). The relationship between scores on the Problem-Solving Communication scale and scores on the Aggression and the Disagreement About Finances scales was significant for women but not for men.

Aggression

The Aggression scale consists of 10 items designed to assess the intensity of intimidation and physical hostility experienced from one's partner (Snyder, 1997). Cronbach's alpha for women ($n = 31$) on the Aggression scale was .66; the alpha coefficient for men ($n = 31$) was .42. It should be noted that both alphas on this scale are considered low for social science research. The mean score on this scale for women was 0.74 ($SD = 1.29$), whereas the mean score for men was 0.55 ($SD = 0.89$). The difference between these mean scores was not found to be significant at the .05 level, $t(60) = 0.69, p = .494$.

In addition to the significant relationships noted previously, Pearson product-moment correlations revealed that women's scores on the Aggression scale were also significantly related to their scores on the Time Together scale ($r = .48, p < .01$) and the Disagreement About Finances scale ($r = .74, p < .01$). Other than those noted previously, no additional significant relationships were observed for men on this scale. These findings are somewhat consistent with previous studies. For example, other studies suggest that respondents obtaining high scores on the Aggression scale also have high scores on the Disagreement About Finances scale (Snyder, 2010).

Time Together

The Time Together scale consists of 10 items designed to assess respondents' level of discontent with the amount of interaction they have with their partner (Snyder, 1997). Cronbach's alpha for women ($n = 31$) on this scale was .78; the alpha coefficient for men ($n = 31$) was .88. The mean score on this scale for women was 1.16 ($SD = 1.85$), whereas the mean score for men was 1.16 ($SD = 2.21$). The difference between these mean scores was not found to be significant at the .05 level, $t(60) = 0.00, p = 1.00$.

In addition to the significant relationships noted previously, Pearson product-moment correlations revealed that women's scores on the Time Together scale were also significantly related to their scores on the Disagreement About Finances scale ($r = .74, p < .01$), the Sexual Dissatisfaction scale ($r = .44, p < .05$), and the Conflict Over Child Rearing scale ($r = .43, p < .05$). Men's scores on the Time Together scale were also significantly related to their scores on the Sexual Dissatisfaction scale ($r = .45, p < .05$) and the Disagreement About Finances scale ($r = .67, p < .01$). The significant correlations noted here were the same for women and men.

Disagreement About Finances

The Disagreement About Finances scale consists of 11 items designed to assess respondents' dissatisfaction with the way money is handled by their partner. Cronbach's alpha for women ($n = 31$) on this scale was .77; the alpha coefficient for men ($n = 31$) was .68. It should be noted that the alpha on this scale for men is considered slightly low for social science research. The mean score on this scale for women was 0.74 ($SD = 1.53$), whereas the mean score for men was 0.71 ($SD = 1.32$). The difference between these mean scores was not found to be significant at the .05 level, $t(60) = 0.09, p = .929$.

In addition to the significant relationships noted previously, Pearson product-moment correlations revealed that women's scores on the Disagreement About Finances scale were significantly related to their scores on the Sexual Dissatisfaction scale ($r = .51, p < .01$) and the Conflict Over Child Rearing scale ($r = .58, p < .01$). Other than those noted previously, no additional significant relationships were observed for men on this scale.

Sexual Dissatisfaction

The Sexual Dissatisfaction scale consists of 13 items designed to assess respondents' discontent with the quantity and quality of sexual activity with their partner (Snyder, 2010). Cronbach's alpha for women ($n = 31$) on this scale was .85; the alpha coefficient for men ($n = 31$) was .91. The mean score on this scale for women was 2.58 ($SD = 3.02$), whereas the mean score for men was 4.13 ($SD = 4.14$). The difference between these mean scores was not found to be significant at the .05 level, $t(60) = -1.68, p = .098$.

In addition to the significant relationships noted previously, Pearson product-moment correlations revealed that women's scores on the Sexual Dissatisfaction scale were also significantly related to their scores on the Conflict Over Child Rearing scale ($r = .46, p < .05$). Other than those noted previously, men's scores on the Sexual Dissatisfaction scale were also significantly related to their scores on the Family History of Distress scale ($r = .42, p < .05$).

Role Orientation

The Role Orientation scale consists of 12 items designed to measure respondents' traditional versus nontraditional orientation toward marital and parental roles

(Snyder, 2010). Cronbach's alpha for women ($n = 31$) on this scale was .73; the alpha coefficient for men ($n = 31$) was .73. The mean score on this scale for women was 6.06 ($SD = 2.70$), whereas the mean score for men was 5.55 ($SD = 2.61$). The difference between these mean scores was not found to be significant at the .05 level, $t(60) = 0.77, p = .446$. Scores on the Role Orientation scale were not found to be significantly related to scores on any of the other scales for either women or men. The results of this particular factor were consistent with previous studies. That is, results from other studies indicated that the Role Orientation scale is uncorrelated with other scales on the MSI-R.

Family History of Distress

The Family History of Distress scale consists of nine items designed to assess the respondents' experience with respect to their family of origin (Snyder, 2010). Cronbach's alpha for women ($n = 31$) on this scale was .82; the alpha coefficient for men ($n = 31$) was .85. The mean score on this scale for women was 2.74 ($SD = 2.56$), whereas the mean score for men was 2.13 ($SD = 2.51$). The difference between these mean scores was not found to be significant at the .05 level, $t(60) = 0.95, p = .345$. Scores on this scale were not found to be significantly related to scores on any of the other scales for women. In addition to the significant relationships noted previously, Pearson product-moment correlations revealed that men's scores on the Family History of Distress scale were significantly related to their scores on the Time Together scale ($r = .47, p < .01$) and the Dissatisfaction With Children scale ($r = .52, p < .01$).

Dissatisfaction With Children

The Dissatisfaction With Children scale consists of 11 items designed to assess the relationship between respondents and their children (Snyder, 2010). Cronbach's alphas were not calculated for this scale. The mean score on this scale for women ($n = 31$) was 1.50 ($SD = 1.73$), whereas the mean score for men ($n = 31$) was 1.16 ($SD = 1.65$). The difference between these mean scores was not found to be significant at the .05 level, $t(49) = 0.72, p = .476$. Scores on this scale were not found to be significantly related to scores on any of the other scales for women. Other than those noted previously, no additional significant relationships were observed for men on this scale.

Conflict Over Child Rearing

The Conflict Over Child Rearing scale consists of 10 items designed to evaluate the extent of conflict between partners over child-rearing practices (Snyder, 2010). Cronbach's alphas were not calculated for this scale. The mean score on this scale for women ($n = 31$) was 0.64 ($SD = 1.08$), whereas the mean score for men ($n = 31$) was 0.48 ($SD = 0.77$). The difference between these mean scores was not found to be significant at the .05 level, $t(48) = 0.60, p = .548$.

In addition to the significant relationships noted previously, Pearson product-moment correlations revealed that women's scores on this scale were also significantly related to their scores on the Problem-Solving Communication scale ($r = .66, p < .01$) and the Aggression scale ($r = .46, p < .05$). Scores on the Conflict Over Child Rearing scale were not found to be significantly related to scores on any of the other scales for men.

Total 10 Scales

This analysis included all scales on the MSI-R except Dissatisfaction With Children and Conflict Over Child Rearing. Cronbach's alphas were not calculated for this configuration. The mean score on these scales for women ($n = 31$) was 27.77 ($SD = 12.01$), whereas the mean score for men ($n = 31$) was 26.87 ($SD = 12.48$). The difference between these mean scores was not found to be significant at the .05 level, $t(60) = 0.29, p = .772$. Pearson product-moment correlations revealed that the age of the women in the study was significantly related to their scores on the Total 10 Scales ($r = -.48, p < .015$). This is a relatively weak inverse relationship, indicating that as age increases, the total score on the 10 scales tends to decrease. Men's age was not found to be significantly related to their scores on the Total 10 Scales ($r = -.25, p = .188$).

Total 12 Scales

This analysis included all scales on the MSI-R. Cronbach's alphas were not calculated for this configuration. The mean score on this scale for women ($n = 25$) was 28.36 ($SD = 11.99$), whereas the mean score for men ($n = 25$) was 26.08 ($SD = 8.45$). The difference between these mean scores was not found to be significant at the .05 level, $t(48) = 0.78, p = .441$. Pearson product-moment correlations revealed that the age of the women in the study was not significantly related to their scores on the Total 12 Scales ($r = -.37, p = .074$). Similarly, men's age was also not found to be related to their scores on the Total 12 Scales ($r = -.04, p = .836$).

Total 10 Scales and Total 12 Scales

Women's and men's scores on the Total 10 Scales were found to be significantly related ($r = .79, p < .01$). Similarly, women's and men's scores on the Total 12 Scales were also found to be significantly related ($r = .79, p < .01$). These relatively strong correlations indicate that the men and women in the study demonstrated a high degree of consistency in their responses when considered collectively across the scales.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Although this study does not address what kept the participants married for 40 years or more, we believe that by consulting the research about long-standing

marriages, some basic assumptions can be made about the participants in this study. First, these couples likely share particular commonalities. They may have a history of being open, loyal, patient, and committed. Given that this study was conducted in a highly Christian area, it is also likely that moral values and religious beliefs also helped keep these couples together (Duba & Watts, 2009; Vaaler et al., 2009). Second, there are various behavioral interactions that correlate with marital preservation (Gottman, 1998; Gottman & Notarius, 2002). For example, it is probable that the couples in this study can usually experience vulnerability with each other and typically respond in emotionally validating ways; the foundation of their marriage is one of friendship and intimacy. During conflict, these couples likely use positive affect (e.g., humor), maintain calmness and flexibility, attack the issue and not the spouse, and will notice opportunities for repair attempts rather than focus on each other's negative traits or take part in a "demand (wife)–withdraw (husband)" pattern (Gottman, 1998; Lauer & Lauer, 1986).

Marital satisfaction may not necessarily be the most crucial factor or reason why couples stay together. The results from this study indicate that couples who have managed to stay committed to the marriage over many years still have disappointments and report areas of dissatisfaction. In fact, some of the areas appear to be linked to each other (e.g., dissatisfaction with affective communication is linked to sexual dissatisfaction). From a clinical perspective, this is important for two reasons. First, many couples will present one issue at the onset of therapy, but this does not mean that other aspects of their relationship are being negatively affected. Second, if marital satisfaction is not necessarily related to marital duration, couples may be staying together for reasons (i.e., religious commitment) other than really wanting to be together. It behooves couples counselors to help the couple identify other areas of the relationship in which they are struggling, as well as why they are committed to the relationship. Is there something more keeping them together than a religious promise? Is it possible to create a desire to stay together because they really like each other and enjoy each other's company? The remainder of this section includes an overview of the significant relationships among factors and also some implications for treatment.

Global Distress

As previously mentioned, the Global Distress scale measures the respondent's overall dissatisfaction in the relationship. The results from this study indicate that global distress or marital dissatisfaction is also linked to other areas of dissatisfaction. This is fairly consistent with results from previous studies. For example, individuals with high Global Distress scale scores typically also obtain high scores on the following scales: Problem-Solving Communication, Affective Communication, Time Together, Aggression, Disagreement About Finances, and Conflict Over Child Rearing (Snyder, 2010).

For both men and women in this study, global distress often accompanies deficits or struggles in problem solving, lack of time spent together, and disagreement about finances. Women who reported high degrees of global distress also may feel intimidated by their partners and have experienced conflict regarding the raising of children. Men who experience global distress may be dissatisfied with the amount of affection and understanding being expressed by their wives. The latter finding is fairly consistent with those from other research studies (Snyder, 2010).

When most couples seek counseling, they typically have a specific problem in mind. Couples may mention other distressing issues but maintain emphasis on at least one. The results from this study indicate that dissatisfaction in the marriage is typically related to many issues.

Although this study does not offer insight onto the actual process of how, or if, one area of dissatisfaction leads to another, counselors may consider what Gottman (1998) called the *distance and isolation cascade*. The cycle begins when partners perceive each other in more negative light than positive. The “flooding” (Gottman, 1999, p. 73) of these negative emotions and reactions may lead to problems being perceived as severe. Unless the couple is able to acknowledge that the floodgates have opened, they may instead become distant and rely on working out such problems alone, which can eventually lead to what Gottman referred to as parallel lives. The consequences of this could be the demise of the relationship.

Gottman (1999, p. 301) suggested that couples should reset the negativity threshold, or incorporate the “marital poop detector.” Counselors can help couples decide whether or not they are headed toward a downward cascade and if their negative perceptions of each other outweigh the positive. Couples may be encouraged to create ways in which to stop or decrease the frequency of negative perceptions and reactions. Depending on the counselor’s theoretical perspective, various techniques may be incorporated, such as record keeping of positive reactions, replacing routine individual activity with a shared activity, finding and incorporating exceptions (Gottman’s, 1999, oral history review), examining and comparing basic need satisfaction (Duba, 2009), and incorporating a style-of-life summary (Sweeney, 1975). The latter three exercises are examples of what can be used as interventions.

Affective Communication and Problem-Solving Communication

For both men and women, dissatisfaction with the amount of understanding and affection (including dissatisfaction with support and empathy from partner, and mutual disclosure) is related to dissatisfaction in the following areas: problem solving, time together, communicating about finances, and sex. These findings are fairly consistent with previous studies (Henry et al., 2005; Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993). Individuals scoring high in the Affective Communication scale also tend to score high in the following scales: Problem-Solving Communication, Time Together, Disagreement About Finances, and Sexual Dissatisfac-

tion (Snyder, 2010). Perhaps it is not necessarily the content (e.g., money) that summons dissatisfaction but rather the affect of the conversation, or how the conversation is processed. Although this study did not elicit information about whether couples believe it is important to be able to feel vulnerable, supported, and safe when talking about the above-mentioned issues, it is advantageous for counselors to explore the context in which it is safe and comfortable for couples to discuss difficult issues. During the initial couples session, counselors may ask couples the following questions: (a) What issues do you feel comfortable talking about? (b) What issues do you not feel comfortable talking about? (c) What makes you feel uncomfortable (i.e., it's not safe, lack of support)? (d) What do you need from your spouse in order to talk about or bring up issues that make you feel unsafe? (e) What gets in the way of you feeling safe? and (f) Have you ever been able to talk about these issues comfortably? What was different then?

For both men and women in the current study, dissatisfaction in the area of problem-solving communication was related to dissatisfaction with time spent together. This finding is also supported in other studies (Snyder, 2010). The Problem-Solving Communication scale falls under three dimensions: overreactivity of partner resulting in inability to discuss sensitive topics, lack of specific problem-solving skills, and failure to resolve minor differences. The results suggest that when couples believe that they are unable to talk through minor differences or talk to each other about sensitive topics, they also do not have shared leisure activity and shared interests.

If couples report that the reason they are not finding or investing in time spent together is related to the spillover of the problem-solving difficulties, counselors can teach clients about the importance of self-soothing and effective and efficient repair attempts. For example, Mrs. Jones (a hypothetical client) reports feeling distant, angry, and hurt after she talks to her husband about his “excessive spending.” The counselor may address the following didactically or in role plays: (a) the relevance of internal locus of control versus external control (Glasser, 1998), (b) ways in which to self-soothe (deep breaths, physical stimulation, cognitive reframing), and (c) compartmentalizing or finding ways in which to create a desire to spend time with Mr. Jones despite being upset with him about any given issue.

Time Spent Together and Disagreement About Finances

For both men and women in the study, dissatisfaction related to time spent together (lack of shared leisure activities and shared interests) was significantly related to disagreement about finances (lack of confidence in partner's handling of finances, arguing over finances). There are a few hypotheses about why this relationship existed. Perhaps some couples are divided about how much money should be expended on leisurely activities, there is limited time spent together, or there is limited opportunity to talk about the sensitive topic of finances. Henry et al. (2005) suggested that decisions about financial resources may often lead to conflict and tension in late-life marriages. Such tension may permeate during the intimate times couples spend together. Couples

counselors may investigate whether a relationship exists between a couple's dissatisfaction in time spent together and their dissatisfaction with finances.

Role Orientation

The Role Orientation scale measures respondents' traditional versus nontraditional orientation toward marital and parental roles. The results from this study support other research findings; role orientation (and gender) is not related to areas of dissatisfaction (Henry et al., 2005; Snyder, 2010). That is, results from other studies indicated that this scale is uncorrelated with other scales on the MSI-R. This is important information because one may question the relevance of the findings from this study to couples who are younger and who have recently married. In other words, whether spouses assume traditional gender roles or other roles, they are likely to still experience and report areas of dissatisfaction in the marriage.

Does Marital Duration Heal Old Wounds and Build Resilience Against Marital Dissatisfaction?

From the results of this study, as well as other studies (e.g., Henry et al., 2005), time does not appear to heal old wounds, nor does it appear to build resistance to dissatisfaction. For example, many of the couples in this study were married much longer than 40 years. All of them were retired. If they had children, their children were grown up. The couples had plenty of time to work through financial adjustments. They had many years to work through and find more satisfying ways of communicating with each other. However, for women, conflict over child rearing was still significantly related to distress in problem-solving communication. For women, there was a relationship between disagreement about finances and sexual dissatisfaction and conflict over child rearing. Men and women both reported dissatisfaction in affective communication; for both parties this area of distress was related to other areas of distress (i.e., problem-solving communication, time spent together, disagreement about finances, sex).

If marital duration does not necessarily build resilience against areas of marital dissatisfaction, perhaps one's attitude about being married does. Commitment to each other and/or the promise to stay married forever may be an important contributing factor in long-term marriages. Furthermore, this study appears to support Gottman's (1998, 1999) research. Couples may not be happy all the time and they may struggle with perpetual problems; however, the context of their conversation or the use of positive affect during disagreements is essential.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As is the case with most forms of social science research, the current study was subject to limitations that should be taken into account in any interpretation of the results. The first limitation relates to the participant pool. Couples were selected from a centralized location in a predominantly rural, southern midwestern

city, and the results could be a reflection of the cultural norms associated with this region. Future researchers could potentially enhance the generalizability of the results obtained by including participants from a greater cross-section of geographic locations. Furthermore, most of the participants in the current study self-selected as Christian. This could limit the implications of the study, and it is strongly recommended that future inquiries attempt to include couples from non-Christian religious affiliations. A second limitation relates to how the MSI-R instruments were completed. Respondents were mailed the surveys and were asked to return them in the self-addressed stamped envelope provided. Spouses could have consulted each other when completing the instruments, which could account, at least in part, for the lack of significant differences between men and women on their mean subscale scores. Future efforts could be augmented with follow-up interviews or focus groups, which could allow researchers to explore the relationships and issues identified by the instrument(s) used in more detail. In addition, a qualitative study might follow up on the relationships found among MSI-R factors as well as the question, if marital duration does not heal old wounds and build resistance against marital dissatisfaction, what keeps long-term couples together?

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