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Age, Education Level, and Length of Courtship in Relation to Marital Satisfaction

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The purpose of this study was to determine whether there is a relationship between marital satisfaction (as measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale; Spanier, 1976) and the independent variables of age, education level, and courtship length (parsed into pre- and post-engagement periods). Respondents ($N = 60$) were required to complete surveys online regarding their experiences in their marriages. Results indicate that there was not a statistically significant relationship between marital satisfaction, age, education level, and courtship length. However, there was a negative correlation between post-engagement courtship and dyadic adjustment, indicating that, as length of engagement increases, marital adjustment decreases. Future research is needed to explore the nature of this relationship.

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Abstract

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Keywords: marital satisfaction, age, education level, courtship

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Age, Education Level, and Length of Courtship in

Relation to Marital Satisfaction

In the United States, the most salient indicator of couple distress is a stable divorce rate of approximately 50% among married couples (Kreider & Fields, 2002), with about half of these divorces occurring within the first 7-8 years of marriage (Snyder, Heyman, & Haynes, 2005). Only one third of married persons report being "very happy" with their marriage, which is down more than half from 25 years ago (Snyder, Heyman, & Haynes, 2005). Independent of divorce, relationship research suggests that most, if not all, couples go through difficult periods that cause significant distress and put individuals at risk for symptom development. Marital distress can lead to higher levels of depression and anxiety, and can negatively affect children of the union, which can lead to negative outcomes later in life (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). The connection between relationship distress and personal emotional turmoil emphasizes the importance of researching causes for relationship distress and implementing effective intervention strategies to circumvent either the dissolution of a marriage or the entering into a marriage that would later end in divorce (Snyder, Heyman, & Haynes, 2005). Understanding the underlying elements that lead to marital satisfaction is essential for identifying how to approach couples seeking treatment for distress in their marriages (Rossier, Rigozzi, Charvoz, & Bodenmann, 2006).

The concept of *marital satisfaction* is used to describe the extent to which a person enjoys his/her marriage. A higher level of satisfaction is seen as a measure of marital success. It is, therefore, important to study correlates of marital satisfaction in order to determine what variables could potentially predict the outcome of marital success. People get married in hopes of having a happy marriage, which is conceptualized as a successful marriage. Spanier (1976)

argued that, although this concept may seem ambiguous, the growing field of research in this area demands attention. There is a strong interest in the continued study of how couples form successful marriages, to which the profusion of existing research can attest.

In this study, the potential correlates of marital satisfaction are explored in an effort to better understand the marital dyad, especially variables that contribute to its success. The variables of study will be outlined, and past literature regarding their relationships to marital satisfaction will be explored. This will be followed by an explanation of the methodology of the current study, a discussion of the findings, and directions for future research in the area of marital satisfaction.

Literature Review

One effective way of decreasing marital distress is to identify factors that most likely lead to later discord. The variables of focus in this study are age at time of marriage, education level, and courtship length. Age at time of marriage was chosen because of its prevalence in marital satisfaction literature, and also because it has been described as the single best predictor of marital satisfaction (Bumpass & Sweet, 1972). Education level was chosen because there is a natural correlation between age and education level (i.e. the older one is, the more time one has to continue education). Research has shown that women are more likely to discontinue their education post-nuptials (Bayer, 1969, 1972), and that women with more education have less stable marriages (Cherlin, 1979; Janssen et al., 1998; Kalmijn (1999). However, Heaton (2002) found that a higher education level could potentially predict marital satisfaction. The question raised by Tucker and O'Grady (2001) about whether differences in education level can predict marital dissatisfaction is also of note. Therefore, the focus of this study is whether education level pre- and post-nuptials as well as differences in education level between spouses are correlated with marital satisfaction. The final variable, courtship length, was chosen because of past research that indicated length of marriage was negatively correlated with marital satisfaction (e.g. Dush, Taylor, & Kroeger, 2008), yet there is a paucity of research that focuses on length of relationship prior to marriage. If length of marriage is negatively correlated with marital satisfaction, then one can infer that those who date longer before getting married would experience more marital distress sooner because their relationships had already aged at the time of their nuptials.

Age at Time of Marriage

Most research in the area of marital satisfaction has focused on age at time of marriage (e.g. Lee, 1977; Booth & Edwards, 1985). There is virtually unanimous agreement that there is an inverse association between the age at first marriage and the probability of divorce—meaning that the younger one is when married, the higher the likelihood of divorce (Lee, 1997). People who marry early are at a higher risk of marital instability than those who marry later in life. One major reason for addressing age is that factors which are negatively related to marital "success" (i.e. whether one divorces or remains married) include many which are related to age at time of marriage, such as low education, premarital pregnancy, short premarital acquaintance, personality maladjustment, and low socioeconomic background (Burchinal, 1965).

Bumpass and Sweet (1972) studied whether the inverse correlation between age at time of marriage and marital instability was attributable to the participant's education, premarital pregnancy, religious affiliation, parental marital stability, or husband's marital history. They performed a multivariate analysis on a large sample of married, White women under the age of 45, and found that marital instability was not attributable to the aforementioned factors. Their data showed that age at marriage was the strongest single predictor of marital instability in their analysis. This means that, absent of all other seemingly relevant variables, age at time of marriage was the strongest predictor of marital stability.

Lee (1977) studied the relationship between marital satisfaction, age at marriage, and marital role performance. "Role performance" was defined as the extent to which a person acts out what is perceived to be their role socioeconomically and interpersonally in marriage. This study used the used data from a nonrandom sample of 394 married couples, including spouses' evaluations of role performance in order to gain a more accurate response. All respondents were

in their first marriage, had been married six years or less at the time of the study, and were under

35 years of age. Through use of multivariate analysis, Lee found a positive correlation between

age at time of marriage and marital satisfaction after controlling for the antecedent variables of

length of marriage, education, socioeconomic background, and religious importance. This means

that as the age at marriage increased, marital satisfaction increased as well. This positive

correlation finding was true for both males and females. Lee concluded, however, that the

strength of the correlation was moderate at best, and may be related to an unmeasured third

variable—potential for remarriage. He hypothesized that those who marry young may be

cognizant of their better potential to remarry in the event of a divorce, and may then be less

willing to tolerate dissatisfaction.

Booth and Edwards (1985) expanded on the research done by Bumpass and Sweet (1972)

and Lee (1977) and also found that age at marriage was positively correlated with marital

satisfaction due to inadequate preparation. They hypothesized that this situation likely stemmed

from inadequate role models or from lack of exposure length to these role models because of

early termination of their "marriage apprenticeship" (p. 68) as a result of early marriage. They

felt that people who married at an early age were more likely to experience deficiencies in their

marital role performance, which then led to marital dissatisfaction. Data for this study came from

a national sample of men and women under 55 years of age who were interviewed by telephone

in 1980. Researchers used random digit dialing procedures to locate eligible participants. In total,

the analysis involved 1,715 men and women currently in their first marriage. To test their

hypotheses that early marriage was related to marital instability and poor role performance, and

to control for the confounding variable of external pressure for marriage, Booth and Edwards

used the Marital Instability Index (Booth, Johnson, & Edwards, 1983) as well as multiple items

to assess role performance, alternatives to the present marriage, and external pressure for

marriage. They found that marital instability is the highest for those who married early (before

age 20). Those who married in their twenties scored the lowest on marital instability. They found

that those who married later than their twenties scored similarly to those that married earlier,

which suggested that marital stability may have a curvilinear relationship with age.

Bradbury, Fincham, and Beach (2000) continued in this similar study of marital

satisfaction in relation to age. Their research indicated that both society and the individual

benefit when couples form strong marriages, as those unions frequently lead to less involvement

in crime and other detrimental activities by spouses and/or offspring. Slowly declining divorce

rates over the last eight years may be related to a sharp increase in the average age of brides and

grooms during that same span of time; however, overall martial satisfaction has dropped

significantly over the past four decades, and continues to noticeably decline for nearly all

couples during the first decade of marriage. Furthermore, the positive and negative factors that

led to both increased marital satisfaction and marital dissatisfaction, respectively, may not be

mutually exclusive (i.e. satisfaction in marriage is a judgment based on criteria that changed both

with the age of each partner and that of the marriage).

Jose and Alfons (2007) examined the effects of age, number of children, employment

status, and length of marriage on marital satisfaction. They found that those who married later

were more likely to remain married, but also that those who married younger and get divorced

are more likely to remarry. Contrary to previously stated results, these researchers found that age

had a significant negative effect on the sexual adjustment and marital adjustment of first-married

adults. In other words, the older one was at the time of first marriage, the less adjusted the

individual would be toward the marriage and, consequently, the less satisfaction one would

express. Middle-aged adults seemed to have greater adjustment problems than both young and elderly participants involved in the study. These researchers also found an effect related to education level, which will be discussed in the next section.

Education Level

Given that education level generally increases as age increases (e.g. people do not decrease in education level) and that age is positively correlated with marital satisfaction, it seems reasonable to suggest that education level would be positively correlated with marital satisfaction as well. Research has indicated that education level may predict marital satisfaction in some populations, though past studies were focused on whether women continued their education beyond time of marriage (Bayer, 1969, 1972), or have shown whether educational attainment pre- and post-nuptials was related to marital satisfaction (Davis & Bumpass, 1976). While studies have explored whether continued education for women could be predictive of marital instability has been explored, no studies have been devoted specifically to whether education level pre- and post-nuptials is related to marital satisfaction. Because of this dearth in research, one variable included in this study is education level and its possible correlation to marital satisfaction.

Davis and Bumpass (1976) studied continued education among women in the United States. They found that women with eight or less years of schooling at time of marriage were less likely to continue with their education, though this was attributed to less initial commitment to education. They also found that women who had some college at the time of marriage were more likely to continue their education past the time of their marriages, and that women who were divorced or separated also tended to continue their educations. However, there was no confirming or disconfirming evidence that a desire to continue education is what led to the

marital instability that caused the disruption (Bumpass & Sweet, 1975). It would therefore be

interesting to explore whether education level could lead to marital instability, especially when

Cherlin (1979), Janssen**,** Poortman, and Kalmijn (1998), and Kalmijn (1999) all found that

highly educated women had higher rates of unstable marriages. Jose and Alfons (2007) also

found that as education level increased, there were indications of increased sexual adjustment

problems.

        Heaton (2002) explored information from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth

that indicated that marriages contracted after 1980 are becoming increasingly stable and sought

to find explanations for this change. In contrast with the aforementioned findings (e.g. Cherlin,

1979; Janssen et al., 1998; Kalmijn, 1999), Heaton found that marital dissolution is lower among

women who are more educated or who marry at an older age. In fact, he concluded that age at

marriage plays the greatest role in accounting for trends in marital dissolution, and stated that

women who marry at older ages have more stable marriages. He also found that marriages were

more stable if the husband is older or more educated, but not if the wife is older or more

educated. Additionally, he found that wives that are less educated than their husbands tend to be

less educated than other wives.

        Tucker and O'Grady (2001) also included a discussion of intelligence, as measured by

educational attainment level, in their study. They investigated factors related to marital

satisfaction, including attractiveness, education level, and age at marriage. Using American

undergraduates to rate eight bogus marriages on a 15-item Likert scale, they found that subjects

judged similarities in education levels to be an important determinant in whether the couple was

likely to have a satisfying marriage. An important aspect of this study was that people of higher

education levels were only seen as having more satisfying marriages if the education level was

commensurate with that of their spouse. Lower-educated couples were also judged as having satisfying marriages, as long as they were similarly matched in level of education. It is important to note, however, that these test subjects judged fictional marriages. Dyadic satisfaction among real-life couples was not assessed.

Elder (1969) took a sociocultural look at education level and marriage, and defined it, along with physical attractiveness, as a factor in marriage mobility. *Marriage mobility* is defined as the change of social class or status, usually to a higher level, through marriage. A woman who is high in marriage mobility has a greater ability to change social status through marriage. Elder hypothesized that women who were better-educated and more attractive were more likely to marry men of a higher social status. Although his findings on female marriage mobility may now seem quaint and out-of-date, Elder made the point, that "American society generally disapproves of a marital exchange in which the ownership of these attributes [education and attractiveness] is reversed, such as when the woman has the intelligence and talent, and the man has the youth or beauty" (p. 520). This theory is consistent with the conclusions made by Tucker and O'Grady (2001) that married couples with differing levels of education may be less satisfied with their marriages if the woman of the dyad is the one with a higher level of education. However, there may be the added factor, which Elder (1969) discussed, that women who attend college have a larger pool from which to choose potential partners. It may be that women who have a high level of education are more satisfied with their marriages because they were exposed to more potential mates and were allowed higher selectivity. As the relationship between marital satisfaction and differences in partner education level is unclear and yields mixed results when examined, it is therefore important to explore this relationship further.

Length of Courtship

The final factor of focus in this paper is length of courtship prior to marriage. This is further broken down into pre-engagement and post-engagement time periods, as this method has not been used in previous research. Length of courtship has been studied infrequently in relation to marital satisfaction, and sources of information are much less prevalent than the previous variables of education level and age. Hansen (2006) reported in his study of 952 southern California participants that he found a positive correlation between courtship period and marital satisfaction (measured by the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale [Burnett, 1987]) and a negative correlation between courtship period and incidences of divorce. Hansen concluded that a longer courtship period leads to a higher level of later marital satisfaction.

Teichner and Farnden-Lyster (1997) studied whether total length of relationship, including dating period and marriage, related to marital satisfaction. They surveyed 49 recently married couples and found that those who had been in relationships less than 52.5 months reported significantly higher marital satisfaction (as measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale [Spanier, 1976]) than those who had been in relationships for more than 52.5 months. There are two major downfalls to this study: the unexplained, arbitrary cut-off point of 52.5 months, and the lack of distinction between the time spent dating (courtship length) and the total time married. Nevertheless, these findings are in direct disagreement with those of Hansen (2006), who found that those who dated longer before marriage later reported a higher level of marital satisfaction.

Though courtship length been infrequently studied, length of marriage has recurrently been used as a variable correlated with marital satisfaction, and these studies often agree with Teichner and Farnden-Lyster (1997) rather than Hansen (2006). Dush, Taylor, and Kroeger

(2008) used longitudinal data ($N = 1,998$) to test for the course of marital happiness over time. Respondents were surveyed in six different waves that spanned 20 years (1980-2000). The researchers found that, though the respondents reported varying levels of overall happiness (separated into "low," "middle," and "high" happiness groups), all groups experienced a decline in marital happiness over time. They concluded that, over time, people become increasingly less satisfied with their relationships, though this lack of satisfaction is mediated by the respondents' original happiness in their marriages. In other words, people who were originally in the "high" happiness group experienced less of a decline than those in the "low" happiness group, though everyone experienced a decline.

Summary

Marital satisfaction is examined in psychological research in order to better understand the reasons for marital discord and variables that can lead to divorce. Age at time of marriage is used as a variable in this study because it has been hypothesized to be the single best predictor of future marital satisfaction (Bumpass & Sweet, 1972). Education level has also been found to be related to marital satisfaction, and is used in this study because past research has been done related to perceived marital satisfaction based on similarities in education (Tucker & O'Grady, 2001). However, the researchers did not expand on their findings using actual married participants. Therefore, this research is focused on whether education level in general, and differences in education level specifically, is correlated with marital satisfaction. Finally, courtship length was included as a variable because copious research indicated that relationship length, specifically length of marriage, was negatively correlated with marital satisfaction, yet little research has been done regarding whether courtship length prior to marriage was correlated with later marital satisfaction. Consequently, the research questions of this study are as follows:

1. What is the nature of the given sample?

2. What is the relationship between age and marital satisfaction in the current sample?

3. What is the relationship between education level and marital satisfaction in the current sample?

4. What is the relationship between courtship length and marital satisfaction in the current sample?

Method

Participants and Procedure

This research was approved by the institutional review board of Pacific University in

February 2009 following a proposal written by the researcher that outlined the study. Participants

were recruited for an online survey, posted on Surveymonkey.com, by the social networking

websites Craigslist and Facebook. Advertisements for this study were posted in the "psych" and

"volunteers" sections of the Portland, OR Craigslist website (see appendix), and were recruited

on Facebook by friends of the researcher by means of general announcements. Participants were

able to complete the survey between March and May of 2009. All participants were required to

be adults (older than 18 years old) and in a current, heterosexual marriage for at least six months.

There were 70 total respondents, though 10 respondents provided incomplete information,

leaving a valid sample size of 60 respondents.

Measures

Demographic information survey. Demographic and marital background questions

were developed by the primary researcher. The demographic questions in the Demographic

Information Questionnaire (see Appendix B for measure) were included to provide context to

later participant responses, specifically to discover the nature of the given sample. Previous

researchers (Jose & Alfons, 2007) have hypothesized that older participants will respond

differently than younger participants, and that gender is related to marital satisfaction. Though

other researchers (Bentler and Newcomb, 1978) have concluded that variations in marital

outcomes are better attributed to personality traits than demographic variables, age at time of

marriage, a demographic variable, has consistently been found to relate to marital satisfaction

(e.g. Lee, 1977; Booth & Edwards, 1985; Bumpass & Sweet, 1972; Jose & Alfons, 2007).

Marital information survey. The Marital Information Survey was developed by the

principal investigator in order to answer questions regarding participants' history prior to

marriage, specifically courtship length before and after engagement and education level before

and after marriage. Questions regarding cohabitation were also included so as to control for this

as a confounding variable, as cohabitation prior to marriage has been found to predict marital

dissatisfaction (Brown & Booth, 1996). Questions were chosen based on their high face validity

(see appendix C for measure).

Dyadic adjustment scale. Permission was gained from Multi-Health Systems Inc.

(MHS) to use the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) in this research. The Dyadic

Adjustment Scale (DAS) was developed by Spanier (1976) as a method of assessing both marital

and non-marital dyadic adjustment and has been regarded as the most widely used measure of

intimate relationships (Glenn, 1990). Previously, measures such as the Marital Adjustment Test

(MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959) assessed relationship satisfaction as it related to marital dyads;

this approach became increasingly outdated as more couples engaged in cohabitating, non-

marital partnerships (Spanier, 1976). Further research has used the DAS to assess homosexual

relationship adjustment (Kurdek, 1992).

The DAS was normed with 218 married persons and 94 divorced persons in central

Pennsylvania; care was taken to avoid including a predominantly collegiate population, and

instead participants were recruited by mail and by the cooperation of four corporations in Centre

County, PA (Spanier, 1976). All participants were Caucasian. The 32-item self-report test can be

administered with paper and pencil or online.

The test was meant to act as an overall measure of marital adjustment, though after a

factor analysis, Spanier (1976) parsed the overall measure into four subscales: (a) frequency of

agreement between partners (Dyadic Consensus); (b) frequency of quarrels, discussions about separation, and negative interactions (Dyadic Satisfaction); (c) frequency of shared activities (Dyadic Cohesion); and (d) problems related to displays of affection and sexual interactions (Affectional Expression; Kurdek, 1992; Spanier, 1976). A difference of opinion has emerged regarding whether these four factors, when considered separately, are reliable measures (Sharpley & Cross, 1982; Spanier & Thompson, 1982). Spanier has confirmed that there is high correlation among the subscales and that he does not use the subscale groupings in his own research, although the individual scales may have value in clinical research (Spanier, 1979). He stated (1982) that "refinement of the subscales is encouraged" (p. 737), but there has yet to be developed a consistent alternative subscale grouping. For the purpose of this study, the focus will be on the dyadic satisfaction subscale, though an overall marital adjustment score (i.e. dyadic adjustment) will also be considered.

Questions on the DAS were originally adapted from existing measures of marital adjustment and satisfaction; therefore, the DAS has high convergent validity with similar tests (Rossier, Rigozzi, Charvoz, & Bodenmann, 2006; Spanier, 1976, 1982). Researchers (Sharpley & Cross, 1982; Spanier, 1976, 1982) have found the reliability (Cronbach's Coefficient alpha) of the DAS to be between .91 (with a sample of separated adults) and .96 (with samples of married, divorced, and separated adults). One major drawback of the DAS is that, because consistent population means of scores are not defined, groupings based on "low" or "high" dyadic adjustment are somewhat arbitrary (Sharpley, Cross, 1982). For this reason, this study uses the dyadic adjustment scores only in comparison to each other, rather than as groupings.

Method of Analysis

In order to find whether a relationship exists between the independent variables of age,

education level, and courtship length and the dependent variable of marital satisfaction, as

measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), we used a series of Pearson

correlations. This method of analysis is appropriate because it illustrates whether there are

relationships between variables, which is the scope of this research, but does not give

information regarding how much one variable can predict another, which is not the scope of this

study. In the case of this study, we used multiple independent variables and compared them to

both marital (dyadic) satisfaction and marital (dyadic) adjustment scores in a between subjects

design.

Results

Survey results were gathered from 60 adults (40 women). The participants had a mean age of 28.33 *(SD = 6.28)* at the time of the survey, with a range of 22 to 52. The mean age at which the participants were married was 22.98, with a range of 18 to 39 *(SD = 3.62)*. The majority of respondents (*n* = 50) were married in their twenties , with only 11.6% (*n* = 7) married before 20, and 5.1% (*n* = 3) married after age 29. The mean length of marriage (in years) was 5.22, with a range of one to 32 *(SD = 5.60)*. The majority of participants (*n* = 52) had only been married one time, with the range of total marriages from one to two. No participants were married more than twice. Of the 60 respondents, 85% (*n* = 51) were Caucasian, 5% (*n* = 3) were Hispanic, and 10% (*n* = 6) were bi- or multiracial (including Asian, Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Caucasian, and African-American).

Participants had a mean education level at time of marriage of "some college" with a range of "high school diploma" to "some graduate school." There were no participants involved in this survey that did not complete high school prior to marriage. Post-nuptials, participants had a mean education level of "Bachelor's degree," with an average range of "high school diploma" to "graduate degree."

Participants had a mean courtship length of 20.82 months *(SD = 21.25)*, with a range of 0.5 to 96 months of dating and engagement prior to marriage. The mean length of dating prior to engagement (in months) was 15.06 *(SD = 18.74)*, with a range of 0.5 to 80. The mean length of engagement prior to marriage (in months) was 6.25 *(SD = 5.29)*, with a range of 0 to 30.

A bivariate correlation was done comparing the three variables (age at time of marriage, courtship length, and respondent's education level) to dyadic adjustment. Education level was further parsed into two categories: education level of the respondent prior to marriage and

education level of the respondent at time of survey (i.e. post-marriage). These four variables

were then correlated using a between subjects design with the total Dyadic Adjustment Scale

score. Results can be seen in Table 1. None of these correlations were statistically significant.

Table 1

Correlations with Total Dyadic Adjustment Scale Score ($n = 60$)

Item	r
Age of participant at time of marriage	.061
Education prior to marriage	-.077
Education post-marriage	-.052
Total courtship length	-.131

Another bivariate correlation was computed to find the relationship between these same

four variables and dyadic satisfaction. The results of the correlational analyses are presented in

Table 2. The results show that none of the variables were significantly correlated with dyadic

satisfaction.

Table 2

Correlations with Dyadic Satisfaction ($N = 60$)

Item	r
Age of participant at time of marriage	.079
Education prior to marriage	.106
Education post-marriage	.018
Total courtship length	.197

Another bivariate correlation was completed to determine whether spouse's education

level is correlated to the respondent's marital satisfaction and adjustment. Prior research (Tucker

& O'Grady, 2001) found that similarities between education levels are perceived to contribute to

marital satisfaction. Therefore, education level differences were examined. The differences were

further parsed into differences at time of wedding and after wedding because researchers (Bayer,

1969, 1972; Davis & Bumpass, 1976) have found that education differences may increase

following marriage, as women are more likely to terminate their educational pursuits. Despite the

aforementioned research, education differences pre- and post-marriage were not correlated with

dyadic satisfaction (DS) or dyadic adjustment (DA) in this study. Results can be seen in Table 3.

Differences in Education Level and Correlations with Dyadic Adjustment (DA) and Dyadic Satisfaction (DS) (N = 60)

Item	DA	DS
Differences in education level		
At Wedding	-.127	.159
Since Wedding	-.123	.059

The courtship length variable was divided into the separate variables of length of

courtship prior to engagement and the length of engagement prior to marriage. A correlation was

computed with these variables and both dyadic adjustment and dyadic satisfaction. Results can

be seen in Table 4. When dating and engagement periods are considered separately, it appears

that engagement length is negatively correlated with dyadic adjustment ($r = -.278, p < .50$). This

means that as engagement length increases, dyadic adjustment scores decrease.

Table 4

Correlations with Dyadic Adjustment (DA) and Dyadic Satisfaction (DS) (N = 60)

Item	DA	DS
Courtship Length		
Dating (pre-engagement)	-.125	.145
Engagement	-.278*	.073

    * Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Upon review of the data, one can see that the variables of age at time of marriage, education level, and courtship length were not significantly correlated with marital satisfaction. Dyadic differences in education level were also not significantly correlated with either marital satisfaction or marital adjustment. When courtship length was parsed into dating (pre-engagement) and engagement periods, a significant negative correlation was found with marital adjustment, though not with marital satisfaction. The interpretation of these results will be discussed in the following section.

Discussion

Nature of the Given Sample: Answering Research Question One

Participants ($N = 60$) who responded to this survey were predominantly Caucasian (85%, $n = 52$), 5% ($n = 3$) were Hispanic, and 10% ($n = 6$) were bi- or multi-racial. This varies from the national average, which is 79.8% Caucasian, 15.4% Hispanic, and 1.7% bi- or multi-racial (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). All respondents had high school diplomas. Additionally, 53.3% ($n = 32$) of respondents had completed a bachelor's degree or higher at the time of the survey. This level of education is higher than the national average of 80.4% of high school graduates and higher than the national average of 24.4% college graduates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

This particular sample appears to differ from the national population in ethnicity, in that they are more Caucasian and bi- or multi-cultural than the national average. This sample also differs in education, in that they have completed a higher education level than the national average. Therefore, this sample may not adequately represent the current national population.

Relationship between Age and Marital Satisfaction: Answering Research Question Two

Although prior research examining the relationship between age at time of marriage and marital satisfaction (e.g. Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000; Bumpass & Sweet, 1972; Lee, 1977) found a strong correlation between the two variables, the results from this sample did not show a statistically significant relationship between these variables. This may be related to this particular sample, as the majority of respondents ($n = 50$) were married in their twenties (between the ages of 20 and 28). There may not be a diverse enough sample to measure the relationship between age and marital satisfaction. Even when the survey results are further

parsed into dyadic satisfaction and overall dyadic adjustment scores, age was still not significantly correlated with these measures.

In this sample, there does not appear to be a relationship between age at time of marriage and marital satisfaction. This lack of a significant correlation indicates that age at time of marriage may not be as strong of a predictor of future marital happiness as past research has indicated (Bumpass & Sweet, 1972). This may be unique to these respondents, or there may be a mediating variable that was not identified by the questionnaire. Also, it is possible that with a larger sample size there would have been more of a variety of ages represented. Perhaps a sample more representative of the population would have yielded different results.

Relationship between Education Level and Marital Satisfaction: Answering Research Question Three

When education level was parsed into education level at time of wedding and education level following the wedding, no statistically significant results were found. Education level does not appear to be correlated with either marital satisfaction or overall adjustment. It does appear, however, that there is a negative correlation trend with education level and overall marital adjustment scores, meaning that as the respondent's education level increased, overall marital adjustment decreased. These results may highlight some difficulty in adjusting to marriage when one is more educated. However, because the statistical analyses of this study were not significant, the actual effect of education level on overall marital adjustment is not conclusive, even though a negative correlational relationship seems to exist. This negative correlational trend was not repeated with marital satisfaction—as the respondent's education level increased, marital satisfaction also increased, though not in a statistically significant manner. This result is congruent with the findings of previous researchers (see Cherlin, 1979; Janssen et al., 1998; Jose

& Alfons, 2007; Kalmijn, 1999), which indicated that higher education levels are positively correlated with marital instability and sexual adjustment problems.

The correlation between marital satisfaction and differences in education level between spouses pre- and post-marriage was also not statistically significant. This may be related to the small sample size, relatively small differences between education levels among respondents and their spouses, or that these differences simply are not significant. Tucker and O'Grady (2001) reported this finding as *perceived* satisfaction. In other words, it was the opinion of outside observers that couples with similar educational backgrounds would be more satisfied, rather than a reported finding from existing couples. Therefore, differences in education level may not actually be related to marital satisfaction. The lack of statistical significance currently supports that there is not a strong relationship between level of education and marital satisfaction.

Relationship between Courtship Length and Marital Satisfaction: Answering Research Question Four

The statistically significant correlation found between courtship length and marital adjustment was surprising because there is the least amount of prior research related to this topic. Courtship length was divided into dating (pre-engagement) and engagement time periods. Both of these were negatively correlated with dyadic adjustment, meaning that the longer the respondents dated and were engaged prior to marriage, the lower they scored on the dyadic adjustment scale. Engagement length was statistically significantly correlated with dyadic adjustment.

Neither dating nor engagement length were significantly correlated with marital satisfaction. It would appear that, at least with this study's participants, courtship period had no

relation to their later marital satisfaction. As the study was voluntary, people who were more satisfied with their marriages may have self-selected to participate (see "limitations").

Implications

The findings of this study imply that age, education level, and courtship period prior to engagement are not correlates of marital satisfaction, as measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). This may suggest that there is not as strong of a correlation between age and marital satisfaction as has previously been suggested (e.g. Bumpass & Sweet, 1972), or it may indicate that there is a mediating factor in this sample that was not identified by the questionnaire.

There does, however, appear to be a statistically significant negative correlation between engagement length and dyadic adjustment, which means that as the length of engagement period increases, the level of overall marital adjustment decreases. This suggests a relationship between courtship length and marital adjustment that has not previously been researched. It also suggests that there is a difference between the time periods of courtship pre- and post-engagement.

Limitations of the Present Study

The main limitation of this study is that it is based on self-report measures. Participants may have responded with considerable bias or answered in a socially desirable manner. It is impossible to assess the extent to which participants answered candidly, and the extent to which they prevaricated.

Another limitation of this study is that individual psychopathology, though it is considered to have negative effects on marital relationships, was not examined by either symptom inventories or clinical assessment. It is therefore impossible to determine whether reported marital satisfaction was mediated by psychopathology. Though it was not the scope of

this research, a symptom inventory may have helped add more information with which to interpret the results.

A third limitation is the relatively small sample size *(N = 60)* and homogeneity of respondents. A larger sample may have yielded more individuals who were older, less or more educated, or had been married multiple times. As the respondents for this research were recruited from online networking sites (Facebook and Craigslist), they do not adequately represent a randomized population. People who do not have access to the internet, for example, were not represented. Also, only two participants had been previously divorced, which may indicate that people with a high overall marital satisfaction self-selected to participate in this survey. People who were less satisfied may be under-represented.

Finally, another limitation is the exclusion of participants in homosexual relationships. Literature regarding marital satisfaction in same-sex couples is insufficient and including homosexual individuals would have required a much larger sample size. Other minorities were also under-represented, but may have been better represented in a larger sample size.

Future Directions

More research is needed in the area of courtship length and marital adjustment, as this was the only variable that produced a significant correlation. A larger study with more participants would perhaps yield results that are better subject to broad interpretation. The nature of the relationship could also be explored, and a study could be designed to discover whether courtship length is a predictor of marital adjustment. Additionally, relationship length should not be considered as one unit beginning with the first date and ending with break-up or death, but rather consisting of distinct subunits. Future research should focus on the separate stages—

courtship, engagement, marriage—of a relationship rather than relationship length as a whole in order to gain a more specific understanding of the relationship trajectory.

Another scope of future research could be to explore other demographic variables, such as gender, as it relates to differences in marital satisfaction. Previous research (e.g. Cherlin, 1979, Janssen, Poortman, and Kalmijn, 1998, and Kalmijn, 1999) discussed the relationship between gender, education, and marital stability. Gender was not a focus of this research.

Finally, although the correlation between education level and marital satisfaction was not statistically significant, more research is needed in this area because of the conflicting and outdated existing research. It would also be interesting to determine, in a large-scale study, whether the perceived relationship between similarities in education level and marital satisfaction discovered in the research by Tucker and O'Grady (2001) could be replicated with real-world couples.

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Appendix A: Craigslist notice for recruitment

Dear prospective participant:

You are invited to participate in a study examining the relationship between age, education level, courtship length, and marital satisfaction. The results of the study will inform researchers of important areas of exploration during the course of couple therapy.

Men and women are eligible to participate in the study if they are at least 18 years old, are currently married, and have been married to their current partner for at least six months.

The study will occur electronically, as you will be requested to complete three brief surveys online using survey monkey. The study will take 15-20 minutes or less to complete, and you may complete the study from any computer with internet capabilities.

There are few minimal risks participants may be exposed to by their participation in the study, and the study does not require you to provide your name or any other identifying information.

If interested and eligible to participate in the study, please click on the link below to proceed with the study:

Link to Survey Monkey

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me by email at EmilyShepAlder@pacificu.edu.

Thank you very much for your participation!

Sincerely,

Emily Alder, B.A.

Doctoral Student

School of Professional Psychology

Pacific University

Appendix B: Demographic Information Questionnaire

1. Sex:
   a. Male
   b. Female
2. Age:
3. Race (please check all that apply)
   a. White/Caucasian
   b. Black/African-American
   c. Hispanic/Latino
   d. Asian/East Indian
   e. Native American (continental U.S.)
   f. Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
   g. Native Alaskan/Aleutian
   h. Middle Eastern
   i. Other (please describe)_____

Appendix C: Marital Information Questionnaire

4. Are you currently married?:
   a. Yes
   b. No
   If you have answered "no" to the preceding question, please discontinue this survey.
5. How many times have you been married (including current marriage)?:
6. How long (in years) have you been in your current marriage?
7. How old (in years) were you when you married your current partner?:
8. How old (in years) were you when you were married for the first time (if applicable)?:

The following questions should be answered about your *current* marriage:

9. How long (in months) were you engaged before becoming married?:
10. How long (in months) did you date your current partner before becoming engaged?:
11. Did you live together (cohabitate) before becoming engaged?
12. Did you live together (cohabitate) before getting married?
13. What was your *highest* level of education completed at time of marriage?:
    a. Some high school
    b. High school diploma or GED
    c. Some college
    d. Bachelor's degree
    e. Some graduate school
    f. Graduate (Master's) degree
    g. Doctoral degree
    h. Other (please describe)
14. What is your *highest* level of education completed since becoming married?:
    a. Some high school
    b. High school diploma or GED
    c. Some college
    d. Bachelor's degree
    e. Some graduate school
    f. Graduate (Master's) degree
    g. Doctoral degree
    h. Other (please describe)
15. What best describes your current academic involvement?:
    a. In college (undergraduate or graduate), full-time student (12 or more credit hours per term)
    b. In college (undergraduate or graduate), part-time student (less than 12 credit hours per term)
    c. Not in college with no plans to attend
    d. Not currently in college but plan to attend
    e. Other (please describe)
16. Are you happy with your current level of education?
    a. Yes
    b. No

The following questions should be answered about your *spouse:*

17. What was your SPOUSE'S *highest* level of education completed at time of marriage?:

    a. Some high school
    b. High school diploma or GED
    c. Some college
    d. Bachelor's degree
    e. Some graduate school
    f. Graduate (Master's) degree
    g. Doctoral degree
    h. Other (please describe)

18. What is your SPOUSE'S *highest* level of education completed since becoming married?:
    a. Some high school
    b. High school diploma or GED
    c. Some college
    d. Bachelor's degree
    e. Some graduate school
    f. Graduate (Master's) degree
    g. Doctoral degree
    h. Other (please describe)

19. What best describes your SPOUSE'S current academic involvement?:
    a. In college (undergraduate or graduate), full-time student (12 or more credit hours per term)
    b. In college (undergraduate or graduate), part-time student (less than 12 credit hours per term)
    c. Not in college with no plans to attend
    d. Not currently in college but plan to attend
    e. Other (please describe)