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Factors Affecting Marital Satisfaction among Chinese Newlyweds

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Abstract

Objective: To explore the correlations among personal traits, marital interaction and marital satisfaction.

Methods: NEO-FFI, Coping style scale, MLOC, Marital Commitment Scale, Interpersonal Problem Solving Inventory and Locke-Wallace marital adjustment Test were used among 370 Chinese newlyweds.

Results: The cross section survey showed that, the neuroticism, external locus of control of marriage, was significantly negatively correlated with marital satisfaction; the openness, internal locus of control, positive coping, marital commitment, Interpersonal Problem Solving, is significantly positively correlated with marital satisfaction; commitment, interpersonal problem solving and openness could predict the marital satisfaction.

Conclusion: Enhancing the level of marital commitment, changing the negative attributions into positive, solving problems positively by using dyadic adjustment and constructive communication would be helpful to marital success.

Keywords: Marital satisfaction; Coping; Problem solving; Newlyweds

Introduction

Many people wish to have a satisfied long-term intimate relationship, just as Maslow and Lewis [1] addressed in his Hierarchy of Needs theory, the belongingness and love needs are basic psychological needs of the human being. Harmonious and stable marriage is not only important to the couples' physical and psychological well-being, it is also essential to their children's development.

The study of marital quality and its related factors has always been a hot spot in the field of marriage and family. Numerous articles on this topic focused on personality, cognitive styles, interactional styles, etc. However, only a few of them address the stable factor such as personality and also dynamic factor (for example, interactional problem solving) at the same time.

In the current study, we use a sample of Chinese newlywed couples as participants to examine the roles that two groups of variables play in marital satisfaction, including the stable personality traits and dynamic factors play in marital satisfaction, including coping styles, interactive problem-solving and marital commitment.

Method

Participants

Couples who got married within a year, both husband and wife were in their first marriage, without children, high school education level, no serious physical or mental illness. We posted the advertisement of this study to recruit participants. If they met the standards, we sent them a set of questionnaires in an envelope with another envelope and stamp so they could send it back to us.

There were 383 participants recruited and 370 valid surveys. Age range is 23 to 38 years old, mean age is 32. The dating length before marriage is from 2 months to 8 years, 2.13 years on average (Table 1).

Variable		N	%
Gender	Male	95	25.7
	Female	275	74.3
Education	Middle School	35	9.5
	Bachelor Degree	230	62.2
	Master Degree	75	20.3
	PhD Degree	30	8.1
Premarital Cohabitation History	Yes	140	37.8
	No	230	62.2
Parents' Marital Status	Stable and Harmonious	220	59.5
	Still married but not happy	90	24.3
	Divorced	20	5.4
	Parent(s) deceased	40	10.8

Table 1: Participants demographics (N=370).

Measurements

Locke-wallace marital adjustment test (LWMAT): This short questionnaire which aims to test the subjective satisfaction of marriage happiness has great reliability and validity which was also used widely in previous studies. It has 15 items. The sum of sores range of 2-158 points. It was initially used to differentiate well-adjusted couples from distressed (unsatisfied) couples. The higher score represents higher satisfaction of marriage [2].

NEO-FFI: NEO Five-Factor Inventory was developed with the aim of assessing the five domains of the five-factor model of personality: neuroticism (N), the tendency to experience negative emotions and psychological distress in response to stressors; extraversion (E), the degree of sociability, positive emotionality and general activity; openness to experience (O), levels of curiosity, independent judgment and conservativeness; agreeableness(A). The NEO inventories are composed of descriptive statements (e.g. "I am not a worrier," "I really enjoy talking to people") rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) [3].

Trait coping style questionnaire (TCSQ): The TCSQ consists of two dimensions, positive coping and negative coping; each dimension was composed of 10 items. The higher the scores, the more negative the coping styles were. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (very positive) to 5 (very negative) [4].

The Interactional Problem Solving Inventory (IPSI) contains 17 items to assess the ability of married people to interact and solve problems in marriage. The Chinese version of this study was revised by Siu-Kau Cheung of the City University of Hong Kong. The Chinese version was verified to be credible and effective, Cronbach's alpha=0.91, total score of correlation coefficient ranged from 0.35 to 0.74 with an average of 0.57.

The commitment scale (CI): This scale measures interpersonal commitment (dedication) and constraint commitment. 24 items were divided into two factors, devotional commitment and constraint commitment [5].

Results

Among 370 participants, the MAT scores range from 24 to 139. Mean score is 98.98. 51.2% above 100, 48.8% below 100.

Demographic differences

There was no gender difference on MAT scores.

Participants with different educational background showed different level of marital satisfaction. People who had only middle school education background were less satisfied in their marriage than other groups, and the differences had statistical significance. People who had master degree showed greater marital satisfaction than other groups (Table 2).

In this study, we also divided the participants into four groups according to their parents' marital status. We found the second group whose parents were still married but not happily married had the lowest marital satisfaction compared with other three groups (Table 3).

	N	X ± s	Bachelor	Master	PhD
Middle school	35	51.75	-29.35	-49.14	-40.25
Bachelor	230	81.10		-19.79	-10.89
Master	75	100.89			8.89
PhD	30	81.93			

Table 2: Educational background differences MAT scores, $^*P<0.05,^{**}P<0.01$.

	N	X ± s	2	3	4
1	220	94.13 ± 4.45	21.49*	-1.36	-7.36
2	90	72.64 ± 10.04		-22.85*	-28.85*
3	20	95.50 ± 5.50			-6
4	40	101.5 ± 12.45			

Table 3: Parents' marital status differences on MAT scores, $^*P<0.05$, $^{**}P<0.01$.

1-Parents had stable and harmonious relationship; 2-Parents still married but not happy; 3-Parents divorced; 4-Parent(s) deceased.

There was no significant differences on MAT score between people who had premarital cohabitation history and others who did not (Table 4).

Correlation among personality, interaction and marital satisfaction

	X ± s	N	E	O	A	C	MAT	Negative Coping	Positive Coping	Devotional Commitment	Constraint Commitment	Interactive Problem Solving
N	36.74 ± 7.82											
E	35.77 ± 7.18	-0.24*										
O	40.62 ± 6.64	-0.24*	0.17									
A	38.81 ± 6.53	0.05	-0.02	-0.02								
C	41.64 ± 5.99	-0.17	0.25*	0.13	0.08							
MAT	82.01 ± 32.45	-0.24*	0.06	0.34**	0.05	0.05						

Negative Coping	27.55 ± 5.47	0.48**	0.06	-0.09	-0.1	0	-0.16					
Positive Coping	32.72 ± 5.63	-0.14	0.27*	0.45**	0.07	-0.04	0.34**	-0.33**				
Devotional Commitment	57.63 ± 16.96	-0.31**	0	0.28*	-0.05	-0.02	0.76**	-0.19	0.2			
Constraint Commitment	37.78 ± 7.29	-0.1	-0.09	0.1	0.06	0.12	0.35**	0	0.13	0.18		
Interactive Problem Solving	60.25 ± 13.54	-0.21	0.14	0.12	-0.04	-0.06	0.68**	-0.13	0.36**	0.63**	0.41**	

Table 4: Correlation among personality, interaction and marital satisfaction.

Neuroticism, uncontrollable factors had significant negative correlations with marital satisfaction; Openness to experience, positive coping, devotional and constraint commitment and interactive problem solving had significant positive correlations with marital satisfaction.

We used multi factor line regression method to assess how those factors predict marital satisfaction. Variables entered into the regression equation were devotional commitment, interactive problem solving and openness to experience. They could explain 67.6% of equation variation (Table 5).

Dependent variable	Independent variable Entered				B		Standard Bate coefficient	t
		R	R2	R		F		
	Devotional Commitment	0.767a	0.588	0.582	1.016	102.758	0.505	5.551**
	Interactive Problem Solving	0.809b	0.654	0.644	0.865	13.535	0.345	3.919**
	Openness to experience	0.822c	0.676	0.662	0.76	4.776	0.155	2.185**

Table 5: Multiple regression on marital satisfaction, **P<0.01.

Discussion

This study showed almost half of the newlywed we reached had poor marital satisfaction or high risk of marital disharmony. They might also be aware of this and volunteered into this research program. In the beginning of this study, we recruited participants to join our program and promised them to give them feedback, and also there was a follow-up education program which they could also join for free. This might be appealing to those who wanted to improve their couple relationship and become a possible reason why their marital satisfaction level was lower than average.

Educational background might have significant influence on marital satisfaction. We found people with less education might have more struggles than others. This result is consistent with previous study which Xu and Ye [6] explored in her article, she said people with middle school education background had lowest martial satisfaction than other groups. Female who have higher education might also have better social status and more resources; they are the half-sky in their marriage, more equal to their husband, which will also enhance the subjective marital happiness.

Parents' marriage might also impact adult children's couple relationship. As this study showed, participants from a family where parents struggled a lot in their marriage but still keep the marriage were the least satisfied group, they even reported lower score on MAT than people whose parents already divorced. Wallerstein and Kelly [7] leaded a 30 year follow-up research on divorced families and found marital disruption would have profound bad influence on children's development. However, there are also disagreements proved by many

other studies that divorce would not necessarily do harm on children. For example, Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan [8] investigated 2500 children from divorced families then pointed that, 75% to 80% of those children were not permanently harmed by their parents' divorce. Most of them could adjust better two years later after the divorce. For those children whose parents still lived together but fought every day, they lived in a very unstable family full of conflicts even abuses, they suffered most. It is better to let them stay in the love of a single parent, and the mental development will be more vigorous than to keep them in their parents' struggles.

The current study did not show the impact of pre-marital cohabitation on marital satisfaction, no significant difference has been found between participants with pre-marital cohabitation history and those did not have such a history. Previous studies have addressed those two variables and found pre-marital cohabitation could have great negative influence on marriage. Lillard et al. [9] did a 20 years longitude research which proved that pre-marital cohabitation was a major risk factor for the disruption. Rhoades et al. [5] randomly investigated people who got married in last ten years also made a similar suggestion, compared with couples who started to live together after engagement (16.4% of the whole sample) or wedding (40.5%), couples who lived together before engagement (43.1%) had significantly lower scores on marital satisfaction, commitment, devotion and marital faith, higher scores on negative communication styles, they had relatively high risk of divorce in the future. Research did by Rutger University and New Jersey State University also showed the couples who had pre-marital cohabitation history, when they

entered into marriage, they inclined to have higher rates of domestic violence, affairs and divorce.

As China undergoes rapid westernization process, more and more people choose to live together before they seriously think about getting married. They call the cohabitation as "trial marriage". They assume the trial marriage would help them to know each other better, to test if they are good to be together which is very important for their marriage decision. Although the current study did not show differences in this group, this topic needs to be explored further in a larger sample in the future.

Personality and marriage

Our research showed neuroticism had great negative correlation with marital satisfaction. This result is consistent with previous studies. For example, in a 40 years longitudinal research, Kelly and Conley [10] found that neuroticism could be served an important predictor of future divorce. People who were more neurotic would also be more unsatisfied with their partners. Another research explored marriage of newlyweds with four years follow ups showed, marital happiness and satisfaction could be negatively predicted by the neuroticism score.

Coping and problem solving and marital satisfaction

Consistent researches showed that positive coping had positive correlations with marital quality. Drigotas et al. [11] pointed that couples who had higher level of marital commitment inclined to adopt positive coping styles, they would like to make mutual adjustment, communicate actively and solve problems positively, therefore, they had higher marital and life satisfaction.

Also as the current study showed dyadic problem-solving ability would predict great marriage satisfaction. Noller and Feeney [12] did a longitudinal study on strategy and ability of conflict solving, they found that constructive and functional problem-solving strategy would improve intimacy, enhance relationship satisfaction and buffer other consequences brought by pressure and conflicts compared with dysfunctional strategy.

Conclusion

While stable personality traits might affect the intimate relationship in marriage, other dynamic factors could also predict the marital satisfaction. Enhancing the level of marital commitment, changing the negative attributions into positive, solving problems positively by using dyadic adjustment and constructive communication, all of these could be learned by couples and lead them to a happy marriage.

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