

MARITAL STRESS AND COUPLE SATISFACTION

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Abstract: *This paper aims to investigate the relation between the marital stress and the couple satisfaction in a relatively isolated Romanian area, both from a geographic and cultural point of view, as well as the differences regarding the participant's gender and the length of marriage. We found that couple satisfaction is negatively associated with couple stress. There are no differences in couple satisfaction as far as the marriage length is concerned. Although there is not statistically difference between women and men as far as couple satisfaction is concerned, in the same couple we found a statistically significant difference between the husband and the wife which seems to be less satisfied. It would be interesting to conduct a parallel research which should involve as many couples as possible, who live in an urban area which is more connected to the existence of the 21st century in order to highlight the common and distinctive elements.*

Keywords: *marital stress; couple satisfaction; married couples;*

1. Theoretical framework

'Happiness is up to us', Aristotle once said (Bartlett, 2008) and people have been pursuing it since living memory. Family represents the environment where we are born, we grow and evolve, undertaking the traditions of previous generations, the written and unwritten laws which guide our existence.

In the past the family was built through the alliance and interest of the parents. In contrast, today it is based on the feeling of mutual love of the partners (Hatfield & Rapson, 2012) and on their desire to acquire a state of psychical and physical well-being through satisfying the needs of friendship, love, intimacy and stability (Turliuc, 2016).

The spouses bring in the newly-formed family the customs and traditions from their families of origin, which are influenced by various socio-economic factors (Turliuc, 2016). Their commitment entails emotional and cognitive aspects in order to establish a long-term relationship (Stanley & Markman, 1992). Women especially want protection, affection, safety and loyalty; they perceive more problems inside the couple and are more sensitive to relational dysfunctions (Turliuc, 2016). The men who demonstrate mature intimacy and communication and empathy interpersonal skills, thus consciously assuming their relationship, display a higher degree of relational satisfaction (Acitelli, 1992). Men react to the positive or negative changes of their intimate relationship and state that they are happier during marriage (Fiske, 2004).

Often the ideal image of how a marriage should work is different from the sufficient model of a satisfactory family relationship, consequently generating dysfunctions and marital dissatisfaction (Turliuc, 2016). The woman's neuroticism has a negative impact on the partner's degree of satisfaction, while agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness and extroversion have a predictive lower positive impact on couple satisfaction (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

According to gender similarity, the degree of marital satisfaction of the spouses increases if there is a degree of similarity between the partners and the marital gender roles are close. Even the equally high levels of fury determine a high capacity of understanding the

emotional situations of the partner, coordinating the response of the couple to the environment and validating the emotions that are shared between two similar people (Turliuc, 2016).

The dysfunctions inside a couple, which were in the past carefully hidden from 'the public eye' are currently studied in the occidental society in order to understand the changes which have taken place in the family model and to support family stability, which is subject to multiple internal and external stress factors. It has been proven that the degree of satisfaction inside a couple follows the graphic aspect of a bell or of a reversed 'U' letter, being at its peak at the moment of marriage, registering an accelerated decrease in the first years, a minimum level at the moment when the children become teenagers and eventually a significant increase in the case of long-lasting couples, at the time when the children leave their original family (Anderson, Russel, & Schumm, 1983; Gagnon, Hersen, Kabacoff, & Van Hasselt, 1999; Glenn, 1990; Orbuch, House, Mero, & Webster, 1996).

The couple's harmony tends to be shaken by stress factors which originate both inside the marital dyad and outside it, in the latter case coming especially from the partners' workplace. In the case of double-career family models, occupational stress leads to a negative emotional state, which in its turn leads to a lower degree of tolerance towards the partner's mistakes, accentuated disciplinary reactions and bouts of fury towards the children from both the husband and the wife (Buck & Neff, 2012).

Major stress factors (the death of their child) affect both parents and represent a social challenge (Fischer & Riedesser, 2007). Minor but repetitive stress factors damage the relationship. The dyadic adaptation process and the coping strategies are the ones who improve the quality of the intimate relationship (Turliuc, 2016). Cohan and Bradbury (1997) demonstrate that the partners who are exposed to stress factors at the beginning of their relationship and manage to solve the situations in a satisfactory manner can successfully overcome later negative stressful effects.

The people who are alone are prone to contracting infectious-contagious diseases easier, may display cardiac disorders, cancer, obstructive pulmonary conditions and liver affections, the protective effect of marriage being higher in the case of men than in the case of women (Hatfield & Rapson, 2012). The negative effects on health are reported especially in the case of women via cardio-vascular, endocrine and immune system disorders. The cortisol level is modified (Saxbe, Repetti & Nishina, 2008), as is the blastogenic response to the mitogenic factors concanavalin A and phytohaemagglutinin (PHA). The rate of wound healing also decreases (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2005), pathological levels of IL6 appear, as well as tumor necrosis alpha factors and IL beta. The medical pathology (burnout, arteriosclerosis, high blood pressure, rheumatoid arthritis, disorders described in DSM IV), cause absenteeism and economic loss (6.8 billion dollars) in the USA (Forthofer, Markman, Cox, Stanley & Kessler, 1996).

Most studies on couple satisfaction and stress are conducted on occidental families, but the peculiarities of marital stress and satisfaction aspects constitute a wide theme to be explored in our country as well.

2. Objective and research hypotheses

This paper aims to investigate the relation between the marital stress and the couple satisfaction in Romanian families, as well as the differences regarding the participants gender and the length of marriage. Based on previous research, the following hypotheses were brought forward:

H1: Couple satisfaction is negatively associated with the couple stress levels.

H2: There are differences concerning couple satisfaction based on the length of the marriage.

H3: There are gender differences as far as couple satisfaction is concerned.

H4: There are gender differences as far as the couple stress level is concerned.

3. Participants

Fifty couples participated in the research. The participants were aged between 21 and 67 years old ($\bar{x} = 44.5$ years, $AS = 9.8$ years). Twenty-seven couples came from the urban area, while twenty-three came from the rural area. The participants were randomly chosen from different occupational areas and different socio-economic categories. 8% of the participants graduated from junior-high, 47% graduated from high-school and 45% graduated from university. As far as their jobs are concerned, 53 participants work in the public sector, 26 participants work in the private sector and 21 participants are self-employed. Thirteen couples have been married for less than 10 years, 18 couples have been married for 10 to 20 years, 13 couples have been married for 20 to 30 years and 6 couples have been married for more than 30 years.

4. Measures

1. *The Couple Satisfaction Index* (Funk & Rogge, 2007) This questionnaire comprises 32 items, which define the degree of satisfaction/dissatisfaction inside a couple on a Likert scale of 7, 6 scores respectively. High scores indicate a high level of couple satisfaction. Researches have sustained the validity and fidelity of the questionnaire. It can measure marital conflicts, problems inside the couple and the quality of the dyadic relationship (Cui, Fincham & Pasley, 2008). The authors reported a Cronbach's α of .98, while in the current research a Cronbach's α of .93 was obtained.
2. *The Marital Stress Scale* (Matzek & Cooney, 2009) The questionnaire comprises 6 items and the participants have to score each item between 1 and 4 points, where 1 means 'almost always', 2 means 'often', 3 means 'sometimes' and 4 means 'almost never'. The authors reported a Cronbach's α of .83 and a Cronbach's α of .72 was obtained in the current research. Low scores indicate a high level of marital stress.

5. Research results

H1. Couple satisfaction is negatively associated with couple stress levels

In order to test the first hypothesis, the Pearson correlation coefficient between the scores obtained in the couple satisfaction and couple stress variables were calculated. There is a statistically significant negative correlation between the couple satisfaction level and the couple stress levels ($r = -.53$, $df = 96$, $p < .01$).

H2. There are differences concerning couple satisfaction based on the length of the marriage

The couples who were married for less than 20 years were in the first group were compared with the couples who were married for more than 20 years. The t test for independent samples has shown that there are no statistically significant differences between the couples who were married for less than 20 years ($M = 129.63$, $SD = 17$) and the couples who were married for more than 20 years ($M = 127.45$, $SD = 18.62$) as far as couple satisfaction is concerned ($t(98) = .60$, $p > .55$).

H3. There are gender differences as far as couple satisfaction is concerned

The results indicated statistically insignificant differences between women ($M = 126.4$, $SD = 18.64$) and men ($M = 131.2$, $SD = 16.27$) as far as couple satisfaction is concerned ($t(98) = 1.37$, $p > .17$).

H4. There are gender differences as far as couple satisfaction is concerned

The results indicate that there are no statistically significant differences between the women ($M = 10.14$, $SD = 2.42$) and the men ($M = 9.98$, $SD = 2.53$) as far as the couple stress level is concerned ($t(98) = .40$, $p > .68$).

Are the partners different from one another as far as the above-discussed variables are concerned?

In order to test this research question, we used the t test for pair-samples. There was a statistically significant difference between the husband ($M = 131.2$, $SD = 16.27$) and the wife ($M = 126.4$, $SD = 18.64$) only as far as couple satisfaction is concerned ($t(49) = 2.06$, $p < .04$, $d = .27$).

6. Discussion

From the answers given by the researched couples, we have concluded that couple satisfaction is negatively associated with couple stress. Stress inside the couple is due to external factors (Bodenmann, 2005) coming from dysfunctional relationships at work, financial struggle, tense human relationships (with the neighbours, family and children) and internal factors such as lack of compatibility between the members of the couple (different perspectives upon fundamental aspects of family life, annoying habits, faulty expectations, behaviours and attitudes) (Bodenmann & Cina, 2006).

The couple comes into being in order to align two existential paths which had been different up to that point, in order to bring fulfilment to each of its members and to accomplish the multiple roles that the family has in society (economic, procreative, educational roles, as well as roles related to preserving cultural, religious and linguistic traditions, etc.). Marital satisfaction is the essential condition of a couple's stability, as the couple has to deal with multiple positive and negative influences coming from both society and the partners of the couple in a mutual manner. When society is built on a large number of balanced families, it has a higher stability rate, its citizens have a higher life expectancy and better health levels (North et al., 2008).

The results of the current research concord with the researches undertaken by researchers who have explored couple characteristics in the occidental world. In the case of the families from the study zone where there are unwritten laws and traditions, one notes that low stress levels are associated with a high degree of couple satisfaction, while high stress levels are associated with low couple satisfaction.

The sources of couple satisfaction can be found in the very nature of the relationships that often bloom between people who have a high educational degree and a similar family background, who have known each other for a long time and whose families get along well. The partners agree to build their future in the environment where they have lived, they accept the economic and social particularities and the possibilities of further development offered by the area of residence. The partners spend enough time together, and equally participate in the household activities (the society is a semi-rural one, and it has urban influences only at administrative level). The stress sources to which these couples are exposed become similar to the stress sources to which the occidental couples are exposed, and for this reason, the

answers provided to the questionnaire items are similar to those of respondents from other cultural areas.

The participating families are integrated in the communities in which they live, have strong connections with their native families, friends, neighbours and co-workers, social support being a particularity of small and relatively isolated communities, fact which favours group and couple cohesion alike.

The answers provided by the participating couples show that there are no differences in couple satisfaction as far as the marriage length is concerned. The participating couples had a marriage length of 1 to 40 years, and the age of the respondents ranged from 21 to 67 years old. In the literature (Anderson, Russell, & Schumm, 1983; Gagnon, Hersen, Kobacoff, & Van Hasselt, 1999; Glenn, 1990; Orbuch, House, Mero, & Webster, 1996) couple satisfaction follows the graphic aspect of a bell or of a reversed 'U' letter, being at its peak at the moment of marriage, registering a progressive decrease in the first years, and reaching a minimum level at the moment when the children become teenagers and cause multiple problems to the couple, meaning 15-17 years from the start of the marriage. In the case of the couples who managed to overcome this crisis by using their internal resources (dialogue, self-analysis, self-control, flexibility, the capacity to compromise) the degree of satisfaction inside the couple gradually increases as the years go by, professional retirement thus coinciding with very high levels of marital satisfaction.

There were no differences between the couples based on the length of their marriage. Just as the couples in the Western countries, our researched couples register times of crisis, difficulties caused by raising their children, by health issues, by teenage crises, but they state that they are constantly satisfied inside their marriage. The explanation could well reside in the cultural traditions of the area where the respondents live. Here, the marriages take place after a longer period in which the spouses get to know each other, after they get engaged and legally united. To be married equals a distinction inside the community, standing as proof for the couple's maturity. This maturity translates in assuming all the aspects of couple life, in order to safeguard the relationship and ensure its functionality. Tradition allows the young wife to mourn her maiden days, but after the wedding she has to take on the role of a wife. The marital conflicts have to be concluded without showing anything to the extended family or to the community, even if there are tensions, the couple has to seem happy. The oral literature abounds in proverbs and sayings which illustrate the aspect of confidentiality of the relationship between the spouses.

Conversely, in the view of the community and as a personal conviction, having a family is a reason of satisfaction, in as much as the couple still has strong connections with their native families and marriages are done, as much as possible, between partners who reside the same geographic area, have the same ethnicity and religion. It should be noted that both the more experienced couples and the ones who were at the beginning of their marriage reported a constant level of couple satisfaction, irrespective of the length of their marriage.

The conducted research has not found a statistically significant relationship between the stress levels and the couple satisfaction level as far as gender is concerned. Fiske (2004) reports that men have a tendency to fall in love easier, are more flexible to the positive and negative changes inside a relationship and their expectations as far as a couple relationship is concerned are fulfilled to a greater extent than in the case of women. Women take longer to accept their partner, their emotional reactions concerning the positive and negative aspects of the relationship are harsher, and the degree of couple satisfaction is lower. The explanation of the lower couple satisfaction degree for the women of occidental cultures, who were the respondents of Fiske's study, resides in the fact that women's expectations regarding marriage are related to love, protection, stability and romanticism, which leads to them being more sensitive towards the issues that appear inside the couple (Turliuc, 2016).

The couple satisfaction level reported by the men who participated in the current research is similar to the one presented in the literature. They have built a family, have a partner who accomplishes her obligations as wife, consequently the men can state that they are satisfied. The women who participated in the study do not declare a lower couple satisfaction level, because local traditions intermingle: a girl, once married, must become a serious and responsible wife. She should not complain (not even to her mother or to her friends) and she must play the part of a wife who is happy with the current state of the couple. Even if there are dysfunctionalities, the woman has to solve the conflicts and stay silent for the sake of marital peace. She must totally agree with the opinions of her husband. All these demonstrate an ancestral mentality which entails the woman's subordination in the face of man. The woman cannot express her complaints or dissatisfactions even in the face of her partner, let alone in the face of strangers.

The stress level inside a couple is a reflection of the interpersonal processes between the spouses on the one hand and a reflection of an intrapersonal feeling of the person on her own marriage on the other hand (Vajda, 2015). Gender similarity is considered by Turlic (2016) a factor that increases the marital satisfaction of both spouses. According to the spouse effect hypothesis, the couple grows happier as the husband becomes more aware of his relationship (Acitelli, 1992). In the case of the couples who participated in the present research, it is a tradition that since the beginning of marriage the husband should be the head of the family and take responsibility for its well-being. The personal abilities of the husband become important in the case of experienced couples precisely due to the experience resulting from all the years of living together. In the case of younger couples, the husband is already educated in the spirit of emancipating the woman, changing the vision upon the role of the wife, who thus becomes a decisional, educational, economic and spiritual factor inside the family, having a much higher potential than the wife had only a few decades ago.

Fiske's studies (2004) show differences between the husband and the wife concerning couple satisfaction, in that the wives' expectations towards marriage are not met, whereas the husbands consider themselves to be satisfied with their marriage. From the individual analysis of the answers provided by the 50 couples, we observed statistically significant differences between the degree of marital satisfaction declared by the wife and the one declared by the husband. Although the lifestyle and mentality of the 21st century lead towards a harmonious couple in which both members should be involved in daily activities and have equal expectations from their partners, the wives often have to deal with a variety of tasks which are considered of little importance by the husbands and 'a must do' for women. Consequently, women do not find the harmony that they were dreaming of before getting married. Conversely, the husbands declare themselves to be satisfied inside the couple because their partners offer emotional balance, financial support, social prestige and are involved in solving multiple family duties.

7. Conclusions and implications

7.1. Conclusions

In pursuit of harmony and stability, people are subject to multiple influences which in most cases cause them to activate adaptation reactions, having various positive and negative effects. The type of society, cultural traditions, written and unwritten laws, the educational model and particular values of every individual determine the attitude and feelings that he adopts both towards the requirements coming from society and his work environment and towards the family and closest people with whom he interacts and lives.

The present study aimed at a partial and limited assessment of these existential aspects, in a relatively isolated area, both from a geographic and cultural point of view, which is inhabited by a relatively homogenous community, where there are strong traditions passed on from one generation to the next. The area is negatively affected by the discontinuation of the mining activity, the lack of infrastructure and economic alternatives.

Our research subjects consisted of 50 couples who were officially married, in which both partners had an income-generating activity. They completed questionnaires which were identical to those used in researches reported by other researchers, concerning the family and professional stress levels and the work and dyadic satisfaction levels. We aimed to identify relations between satisfaction and stress levels and the length of marriage and gender of the participants.

Considering the limitations of this research, future research directions come into mind in order to further build on the topic and monitor the tackled issue. The research brought into light the strong socio-cultural influences which influenced the way of thinking and the actions of the participating couples. For a conservative area as far as the attitude towards the couple and family life are concerned, conducting such research which assesses couple satisfaction, work satisfaction, couple stress and work stress, opens new perspectives for the ones involved in a couple relationship. They can perceive the contact with a psychologist (psychology student) and the tests used to assess the stress and satisfaction levels as a source of meditation on the particular aspects of the existence of the couples in which they live, on their attitudes towards the partner and on the expectations and benefits of the workplace and of family life.

In pursuit of a harmonious family life and of professional fulfilment, any positive change of attitude, any corrective action on some dysfunctional aspects can have beneficial effects which lead to a high degree of couple satisfaction.

7.2. Research limitations

The research was conducted on 50 couples aged between 21 and 67, with a marriage length ranging from 1 to 40 years, living in a geographic and infrastructural area which is partially isolated from the tumultuous Western existence of the 21st century, where traditions and unwritten customs are respected and passed on from generation to generation. The number of participants is a serious limitation, because one cannot pass valid judgement only after consulting 100 people. The respondents are part of traditional heterosexual families, united via official marriage papers.

The participants have either graduated from high-school or faculty, pertaining to a social class with medium income rates and possibilities. Consensual union couples were not part of the research, as weren't the couples who work in agriculture or those in which one partner temporarily works abroad, which does not allow a more complex image of the situation of couples in this restricted community.

The couples are homogeneous in point of ethnicity, religion and cultural background, which limits the research results to the characteristics of the group. In the area, the notions of psychologist and psychological counselling represent something new. The families only started to ask for the help of a speech therapist, psychopedagogue in the last 5-10 years, when a speech therapy cabinet was built near the kindergarten. People meet the psychologist only when they are tested for obtaining a driving license or when some of them are hired in the educational and medical domains.

Admitting the fact that some existential states require the intervention of a psychologist (marital conflict, dyadic stress situations, educational aspects and conflicts between generations) is still in its early days, the population not being familiar with the notions of psychologist and psychological tests. Many participants considered the research to

be purely related to statistics, nonetheless trying to answer according to the indications they received and to the verbal instructions given before and even during the completion of questionnaires. The socially desirable answers that we obtained have their roots in the educational-familial and traditional core, which entails that intimacy should be kept in family life and the external explorers are not granted access to all details, especially if these details are not aligned with the 'social norms' accepted inside the community.

The research was conducted in one stage only, with the families being seen at a certain moment in their evolution. Consequently, it lacks a comparative assessment in which more years in the life of the questioned couples should be considered.

7.3. Future research directions

In view of the current economic and social situation and considering the evolution of demographic indicators in recent decades, family, in all its aspects, should represent a priority both for the notified bodies, which should ensure the economic stability and for the institutions and organizations which aim to support families in point of education and spirituality.

It is important to research young couples who get married and start their life now in a community with limited economic and social possibilities, but who benefit from tradition, folklore and spirituality worthy of being passed on to future generations. The young couples and the participants to the current study should be monitored twice a year in order to register the evolution of the researched variables (dyadic stress, stress at work, couple satisfaction, work satisfaction). It would be interesting to conduct a parallel research which should involve as many couples as possible, who live in an urban area which is more connected to the existence of the 21st century in order to highlight the common and distinctive elements. The periodical assessments could be intermingled with 'pro-family' interventions, conducted with the support of local authorities, schools (family day, school visiting day, my day with dad, my day with mom, Sunday school inside various religious cults etc.). In small, compact communities, such interventions and family programmes could contribute to increasing the dyadic satisfaction, alongside courses and presentations offered by specialists, such as: family week, pro-family education for young people who want to get married, mom's school, dad's school. The counselling and family planning units, the psychological cabinets in high-schools (aiming students who are close to becoming adults legally) could organise counselling activities for families in special situations.

There is a very complex territory to be explored, but it grants limited access due to the ethnic and linguistic particularities of the Rroma community. The periodic dissemination of the research results, the involvement in the pro-family educational process of the local mass-media, local TV stations and local press, or even the involvement of social networks to which most inhabitants have access, even in isolated areas, would constitute future involvement domains, in order to draw attention on the importance of safekeeping and optimal functioning of the family. This is the warranty of perpetuation not only for our People, but also for the cultural and spiritual values which have been passed on to us.

The future existence of balanced couples could be influenced by the professional and discrete involvement of the psychologist, who will likely be an appreciated specialist for the counselling activity that (s)he can provide.

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