

MARITAL HAPPINESS AND INTERACTION IN EVERYDAY SURROUNDINGS: A TIME-SAMPLE DIARY APPROACH FOR COUPLES

Erich Kirchler

University of Linz, Austria

This study investigates spouses' everyday life experiences and relates them to marital happiness. Twenty-one couples, either married or living together, filled out a diary six times a day during a period of 4 weeks. It was hypothesized that marital happiness is associated with frequency, positivity and effectiveness of spousal interaction. Moreover, happiness should be inversely related to frequency of conflict and positively to accuracy of perception of the other's motivational state. In general, these assumptions were supported by the data.

This paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of everyday life routines in marriages and their rewarding or punishing impact upon the spouses' emotions. More specifically, the paper focuses on differences between happy and moderately unhappy couples' interactions in the familiar everyday surroundings of their households.

Reviewing the literature on the quality and stability of marriage, Lewis & Spanier (1979) list, among other variables, husband-wife interaction as a crucial determinant of marital happiness. The more the shared activities and the less the physical separation, the greater the marital quality. Also White (1983) points to the relation between marital interaction and marital happiness, emphasizing, however, the existence of a feedback loop from happiness to interaction frequency: the more frequently the spouses interact the happier they are with their relationship, and vice versa, the happier they are the more frequently they stay together. In other words, partners in satisfying marriages increase their investment of time in the relationship and seek to increase the frequency and duration of being together in a number of different settings. Further, it can be assumed from learning and social exchange theories that being together is more rewarding to happy than to unhappy spouses.

Being together frequently and feeling good implies that spouses communicate in a mutually satisfying manner more frequently with each other and have a wider range of subjects on which they feel free to talk. If harmonious couples have a more intense companionship than distressed couples, it can be assumed that they feel freer to express their most intimate feelings and needs to one another (e.g. Noller, 1984).

Address correspondence to Erich Kirchler, Department of Psychology, University of Linz, A-4040 Linz, Austria.

Moreover, as a commonsense view holds, happy couples should be less frequently in conflict with each other than distressed partners. However, the concept of conflict as a wholly negative feature for relationships has frequently been criticized: for example, Scanzoni (1979) argues that effective conflict resolution is a necessary condition for a more intense partnership since conflict is a complex phenomena with both a positive and a negative dimension. While harmonious couples may more frequently experience 'positive' conflict, distressed couples may more likely report conflict to be a frustrating experience. Marital happiness is associated with conflict resolution strategies rather than with the probability of conflict. That is, happy couples are more willing to perceive conflict as a joint problem caused by both spouses and seek to find a mutually satisfying solution, whereas unhappy couples are more likely to blame the other for negative affect and expect the other to change (e.g. Fincham & O'Leary, 1983).

Happy and unhappy couples have also been found to differ on accuracy of perception of each other. Spouses' accuracy of sending and receiving information of the partner is a necessary prerequisite to avoiding poor communication and to improving mutual understanding and problem-solving efficiency (e.g. Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Generalizing the findings about sending and receiving non-verbal cues, it can be expected that happy spouses are able to detect the other's current needs more accurately than unhappy couples, who consequently lack understanding of each other and strategies to cope with conflict successfully.

These assumptions were tested by using a newly developed diary technique. The couple diary was a modified version of Brandstätter's (1981) time sampling diary, designed to assess everyday life experiences of individuals.

Method

Data were obtained from a convenience sample of 6 married couples and 15 couples living together for three years on average. The average age of the husbands was between 25 and 26 years; wives were 23 years. Thirteen husbands and 12 wives had college education; the others had lower education. Except two couples with a child under 6 months, the participants had no children. Twelve husbands and 10 wives were employed, whereas the others were either students or housewives, and thus, had no paying work. The monthly average household budget amounted to US\$ 1000.

Couple diary. The diary was a booklet with a set of questions on each page. The questions on a page were to be answered at various points of time randomly selected by the researcher for each day of the study and for each participating couple. Though wife and husband filled out the diary at the same time they were requested to do it independently of each other. The time from 00:00 hours to 24:00 hours was divided into six segments of 4 hours each, and only one point of time was chosen within each 4-hour period with equal probability. Each respondent was given a calendar with the time he or she had to make recordings.

On the diary, the participants indicated the date and hour (scheduled and real time) of record taking and specified whether registration occurred punctually or with delay. Additionally, the following questions were to be answered each time: (a) 'How is my mood at the moment?' (The answers were either negative, positive or indifferent); (b) 'Which adjectives describe my present mood best?'; (c) 'Why do I feel as indicated?'; (d) 'Where am I?'; (e) 'What am I doing?'; (f) 'Who else is

present?'; (g) 'If I am talking to someone, what are we talking about?'; (h) 'How strong/weak do I feel at the moment?'; (i) 'How free/unfree do I feel at the moment?' (Both strength and freedom were rated on rating scales ranging from 1 = weak to 5 = strong, and 1 = unfree to 7 = free.)

If the spouse was absent, the diary entries ended here. If the spouse was present, the following questions were to be answered additionally: (j) 'How good do I think my partner feels at the moment?' (Negative, indifferent, positive); (k) 'Why do I think my partner feels as I indicated?'; (l) 'How strong do I feel at the moment as compared to my partner?' (The answers were either stronger, equally strong or weaker than my partner); (m) 'How much does my partner love me at the moment?' (7-point Kunin faces scale ranging from 1 = not at all to 7 = very much); (n) 'How much do I love my partner at the moment?' (More, equal, less than he or she loves me.)

After every 10-day recording trial, the participants were solicited to cooperate as 'co-investigators'. They were instructed to analyse the contents of their diary themselves to guarantee complete privacy and anonymity. The coding scheme was discussed and designed together with the participants. Among other categories, the following, relevant for this report, were used to describe the situations registered in the diary: (a) hour and date of note taking; (b) mood-state (1 = negative to 3 = positive); (c) needs salient at the moment preceding registering [the participants had to choose up to three different motives from a list of 19; e.g. physical comfort, need for affiliation. These motives were clustered into six categories: physical comfort, social motives (affiliation, sex, love, nurturance), power (self-esteem, revenge, self-assurance, independence, influence), achievement, activity and new experiences, and higher-order motives (order, aesthetical and ethical values, religion, and understanding)]; (d) topic of discussion (if the participant had indicated discussing with somebody, then he or she was asked to register the topic of discussion (e.g. relationship, work; overall 40 topics were listed in the diaries. In the following analysis a distinction was made between private topics, such as talking about oneself, the relationship or one's job; and small-talk topics, such as gossiping, talking about the weather, and other topics, such as purchasing decisions, and other involving, but not private, issues); (e) perceived power or ego-strength, and (f) freedom in the choice of the performed activity. If the partner had been present, the following categories were used additionally: (g) estimated mood-state of the spouse (1 = negative to 3 = positive); (h) estimated needs.

Questionnaires. Olson & Porter's (1983) FACES II, which is used to assess marital adaptability and cohesion characteristics, was translated into German and applied. Four questions about marital harmony and two questions about marital power were added. The questions were the following: (a) I am happy with my partner, (b) my partner accepts me as I am, (c) my partner loves me, (d) our relationship is harmonious, (e) in our relationship my partner has the say, and (f) in our relationship I have the say (all questions were answered on 5-point rating scales).

The participants were informed about the goal of the study and were instructed how to complete the diary. They had two days in which to become familiar with it. At the beginning, they also answered the questionnaires. At a subsequent meeting, the participants had an opportunity to ask technical questions about the diary method. In this session, the experimenter also explained the content analysis of the 2-day recording period. Subsequently, the participants started with the diary. Every day each participant took the completed sheets out of the diary and put them in a

diary-safe, to which only he or she had access, in order to guarantee complete privacy of the records. After each 10 days they met with the investigator or with research assistants and analysed their recordings. At the end, the questionnaires were to be filled out again. The diary recordings extended for four weeks, not counting the 2-day pilot period. During this time, the couples were in close contact with one of the four research assistants.

Results

Marital happiness was estimated in the following way: first, the answers on the 30 items of Olson & Porter's (1983) inventory and on the six added questions were factor analysed (principal component analysis) separately for husbands and wives. The analyses produced 8 factors with the first factor being labeled marital harmony. Since the correlations of spouses' average scores on the 12 items loading on marital harmony factor was sufficiently high ($r = 0.64$, $d.f. = 21$, $p = 0.001$), marital happiness was defined as husband's and wife's combined responses. The couples' responses were averaged and dichotomized at the median in order to obtain two independent samples, one scoring high on marital happiness and the other scoring lower. Ten couples were found to have a highly harmonious relationship whereas 11 couples were moderately unhappy.

Using the median as a cut-off point may be troublesome given the skewness of the distribution on marital satisfaction scores (median = 1.39; range 1.04–2.54). Therefore, an additional method was used to detect harmonious and unharmonious couples, respectively. The 21 couples were cluster analysed using Ward's algorithm on the basis of husbands' and wives' answers on the 12 marital harmony questions. Cluster analyses revealed two clusters of couples which are almost identical to the two subsamples obtained by using the median as cut-off.

Happy and moderately unhappy couples were similar in demographic characteristics. They did not differ significantly in respect of the age of the spouses, education, months living together, the relationship status, job status, monthly average household budget, nor in the patterns of monthly expenditures.

The total number of observations amounted to 4141 [overall 7056 points of time were scheduled in the diaries; during sleeping times (2352 scheduled points of time) no notes were taken in the diary; in 563 cases the participants forgot to register]. Fifty-nine percent of the diary entries were performed punctually at the scheduled time: 41 percent of the time the respondents had registered with some delay.

Since the individual diary entries are related between the single events, conventional data analyses on the real event level would have led to severe shortcomings. Therefore, each spouse's diary entries were averaged and analysed at this aggregated level. This type of analysis is in line with the data handling techniques used in similar studies (e.g. Brandstätter, 1983; Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984).

It was predicted that happy spouses should be together in the same behavioral setting more frequently than moderately unhappy spouses. For each couple, the relative frequency of being together (frequency of being together divided by total diary entries) was calculated. An analysis of variance with marital happiness as independent variable and arcsin-transformed relative frequencies of being together revealed a significant effect ($F = 6.04$, $d.f. = 1, 19$, $p = 0.024$), indicating that happy spouses joined each other more frequently in everyday settings ($M = 0.46$; corresponds to 44 percent of the time) than moderately unhappy spouses did ($M = 0.35$;

corresponds to 34 percent). According to these data, happy spouses, on the average, were together 7 hours a day as compared to approximately 5 hours for moderately unhappy couples.

Being together should be more rewarding to happy than to moderately unhappy couples. When the spouse is present, happy couples should be (a) in a better mood, (b) feel stronger, and (c) report experiencing a higher degree of freedom of constraints than unhappy couples.

Each spouse's diary entries for mood, feelings of strength, and freedom were averaged and analysed by three univariate 2(happy versus unhappy) by 2(partner present versus absent) by 2(sex; within factor) analyses of variance. Marital happiness had a significant impact on the momentary feelings of strength ($F = 4.38$, d.f. = 1, 19, $p = 0.05$) and freedom ($F = 5.01$, d.f. = 1, 19, $p = 0.037$). Spouses in happy relationships felt stronger ($M = 5.43$) and freer ($M = 3.99$) than unhappy spouses ($M = 3.52$). The predicted interaction effect, marital happiness by presence of the spouse, was not found. All three analyses revealed, however, a significant interaction effect of sex by presence of the partner (the respective F -values for mood, strength, and freedom are 6.96, 7.45, 5.60; all $p < 0.03$). Presence of the other was especially rewarding to the husbands: both happy and moderately unhappy husbands were in a better mood ($M = 2.59$), felt stronger ($M = 5.54$) and freer ($M = 4.06$) if their wife was present rather than absent ($M = 2.36$, 5.12 and 3.52). The wives, on the other hand, felt about equally well, strong and free in situations with the husband present ($M = 2.48$, 4.97, 3.85) or absent ($M = 2.44$, 4.84, 3.60).

It was predicted that happy couples would interact more efficiently than unhappy couples. This hypothesis was tested by analysing everyday discussion topics between the spouses. The more frequently spouses discuss personal issues (that is, problems about one spouse, the job or the relationship), and the less often they gossip (that is, talking about other persons or small talk), the more efficient their interaction was assumed to be. According to the wives' reports, happy couples were talking to each other approximately 3 hours a day out of the 7 hours they were together. They focused on personal topics 17 percent of the time (equivalent to 1.20 hours) and gossiped or indulged in smalltalk 26 percent of the time (equivalent to 1.82 hours). Moderately unhappy couples were talking to each other 2 hours out of the 5 hours they spent together daily. They discussed personal issues only 12 percent of the time (corresponds to 0.66 hours) but were gossiping 27 percent of the time (corresponds to 1.49 hours). The relative frequencies of each couple discussing personal issues versus gossiping was arcsin-transformed and analysed by a oneway analysis of variance with marital happiness as independent factor, which failed, however, to show a difference between happy and moderately unhappy couples ($F = 1.85$, d.f. = 1, 19, $p = 0.189$).

Conflict occurring in everyday life situations was operationalized as any situation where one spouse felt bad and attributed his or her bad mood to the partner only. The hypothesis that happy spouses would report being less often in 'negative' conflict situations than unhappy spouses, was tested by calculating the relative frequency of conflict versus agreement. Overall, happy spouses reported being in conflict 24 percent of the time (husbands' and wives' reports were identical), whereas moderately unhappy spouses were in conflict 43 percent of the time (42 and 45 percent according to husbands' and wives' reports, respectively). A two-way analysis of variance with marital harmony and sex (within factor) as independent variables and arcsin-transformed relative frequencies of conflict revealed a significant main effect of harmony ($F = 11.80$, d.f. = 1, 17, $p = 0.003$). As predicted, happy spouses were

significantly less frequently in conflict than moderately unhappy spouses.

Accuracy of perception of the partner's needs was computed by counting the frequency of fit (= 1) versus misfit (= 0) of a spouse's estimation of the other's needs and the needs indicated by the partner. Frequency of fit and misfit, respectively, were computed for each spouse and arcsin-transformed. The transformed relative frequency scores were analysed by a three-way analysis of variance (the independent variables were marital happiness, sex and conflict versus agreement which showed a significant main effect of marital harmony ($F = 6.90$, d.f. = 1, 17, $p = 0.018$) but no other main effects and no interaction effects. Happy spouses were better able to predict the other's needs both in conflict and in agreement situations ($M = 0.76$) than were moderately unhappy spouses ($M = 0.52$).

Discussion

It was predicted that happy spouses would spend more time together; that is, they are together in everyday life situations more frequently than moderately unhappy couples. Staying together should be more rewarding to happy spouses, and also be more efficient for happy than for unhappy spouses. In general, these hypotheses were confirmed. Since the unhappy couples are considered as moderately unhappy rather than severely distressed, one can expect that most of the differences found in this study would be considerably more accentuated if happy couples had been contrasted with couples considering their relationship severely problematic. It should also be re-emphasized that the hypotheses tested in this study do not imply any causal relationship: happiness may be considered as a dependent as well as an independent variable.

Happy couples were found to be together more frequently than moderately unhappy couples. More detailed analysis, not reported here, showed that happy spouses were together more frequently than moderately unhappy spouses at their private homes and less frequently in public places. When being together, happy spouses reported more frequently performing recreation activities. These results indicate that happy couples not only were together more often but they also met in more private situations.

Contrary to the predicted two-way interaction effect of marital happiness and presence versus absence of the partner, happy spouses felt significantly stronger and freer than unhappy spouses both in situations with the partner present and absent, and significantly better if the partner was the only person present. This result seems to indicate that marital harmony not only affected emotional experiences in situations with the partner present, its 'long arm' also embraced everyday life situations with the partner absent. Interestingly, presence or absence of the spouse affected husbands more than wives, independently of the quality of marriage. Husbands were in a better mood, felt stronger, and freer when the wife was present rather than absent. The wives' feelings, on the other hand, were less dependent on the husbands' presence. At first sight, this result contradicts the common opinion about the relative independence of the husband from his wife and the dependence of the wife on her husband. In everyday life situations, the husband seems to need the wife more than the wife needs the husband to feel good. It can, however, be argued that this result is due to the fact that 'wife present' means usually leisure time for the husband, whereas 'husband present' does not necessarily imply leisure time for the wife (cf. Brandstätter, 1983).

Happy couples were expected not only to be more often together than were unhappy couples and to talk more often to each other but also to focus more frequently on central private topics in discussions. This hypothesis was not confirmed unequivocally. A detailed analysis of spouses' discussion topics revealed that there was no difference in the frequency with which happy and moderately unhappy spouses were focusing on relationship issues or their own job, but they differed significantly in the rate of self-disclosure. Wives in happy marriages reported that they and their husbands disclosed themselves (that is, discussing their own individual problems) to each other 5 percent of the cases, while in 6 percent of the cases they addressed relationship problems, and 6 percent of the cases related to their jobs, for unhappy couples the respective percentages amounted to 2, 5 and 5 percent. What is surprising is that personal topics in general were stressed rather seldom by the couples (17 and 12 percent of the cases, respectively). Nevertheless, the data show that marital harmony permits and requires openness: the spouses need to reveal their personal feelings. Evidently, marital happiness involves the partners disclosing themselves, and vice versa: the amount of self-disclosure significantly affects marital satisfaction (cf. Noller, 1984).

It was hypothesized that in everyday life situations happily married spouses were less frequently in 'negative' conflict than moderately unhappy couples. Conflict was conceived as an attribution process, namely as any situation experienced as an unpleasant event by a spouse and perceived as being caused by the other. Happily married couples reported significantly more frequently having pleasant interactions with each other than moderately unhappy couples, who claimed to be more often in conflict. This result indicates that spouses make attributions for their partner's behavior in a manner which is consistent with the spouses' overall marital happiness. That is, non-distressed spouses blame their partner less frequently for negative feelings than distressed spouses, who expect a spouse to change conflict-evoking personal dispositions, while they themselves are not ready to perceive their own behavior as a possible cause of conflict and, consequently, to change it.

The spouses' willingness to cope with conflict is a necessary but not a sufficient prerequisite of harmony in marriage. To be able to cope with conflict in a jointly satisfying way, the spouses need to understand each other's needs. Happy couples were predicted to understand each other's motivational state more accurately than moderately unhappy spouses. This prediction was supported by the data: happy husbands and wives were better able to detect the other's needs both in agreement and conflict than were unhappy spouses.

In conclusion, perceiving the partner's motivations accurately is a highly important prerequisite to marital harmony. Assuming a circular effect, we may conclude that being unaware or unable to perceive the other's situation accurately is likely to provoke negative conflicts and consequently marital dissatisfaction. The inability to put oneself in the partner's place, to construct accurately his or her reality, and to empathize accordingly may cause negative emotions which are attributed to the partner internally and self closure rather than disclosure and openness. Consequently, being together will increasingly exert a punishing effect on moderately unhappy spouses; this also implies that the time spent together will decrease and the relationship will probably further deteriorate.

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