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Marital Satisfaction and Quality

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Marital satisfaction (also called *marital quality* or *marital happiness*) typically refers to the subjective attitude that individuals have toward their marital relationship. Marital quality may be used synonymously with marital satisfaction, but it also has been used to refer to marital adjustment (see later) or to refer to marital satisfaction in conjunction with marital conflict. Marital happiness is typically used synonymously with marital satisfaction.

The marital relationship occupies a privileged status among adults in our society, and as Peter Berger and Hansfried Kellner noted, it is a primary means through which individuals construct and maintain social reality. Satisfaction in the marital relationship is of interest to those who study interpersonal relationships because of its centrality to the meaning-making process in the lives of many adults and because satisfaction in this key relationship is shaped by and shapes aspects of other human relationships (e.g., parent-child). This entry provides an overview of the debate regarding the conceptualization and measurement of marital satisfaction and a summary of the investigation into causes and correlates of marital satisfaction.

Conceptualization and Measurement

Marital satisfaction is perhaps one of the most frequently studied variables in marital research. Despite the wealth of literature examining this construct, there is a continuing lack of consensus among marital researchers about how to conceptualize and measure marital satisfaction, as well as an absence of a unifying theoretical approach to studying this construct. During the past several decades, scholars have engaged in lively debates about how to conceptualize marital satisfaction. There have been two major approaches: looking at the relationship itself (examining patterns of interaction, such as the amount and type of communication and conflict) and looking at individual feelings of the spouses (subjective judgments of satisfaction or happiness). According to those scholars who focus on the interactions in the relationship, rather than on the subjective evaluations made by individuals in the relationship, marital satisfaction is an interpersonal characteristic. Proponents of this approach treat marital satisfaction as a process, the outcome of which is determined by interaction patterns between spouses. Scholars who take this approach, which was dominant during the 1970s, generally favor the terms *marital adjustment* or *marital quality*, although some do use the term *marital satisfaction* as well. These scholars also view marital satisfaction as a multidimensional construct. Multidimensional measures of marital satisfaction typically assess a number of specific types of interactions between spouses (e.g., time spent together/companionship, conflict, and communication). In addition to measuring reported behavioral characteristics of the dyad, some multidimensional measures also include global subjective evaluations of the relationship (such as happiness, satisfaction, or distress). These items are then typically summed. Frequently employed multidimensional measures of marital satisfaction are the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (LWMAT), the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS), and the Marital Satisfaction Inventory (MSI).

During the 1980s, the interpersonal approach to the study of marital satisfaction or marital quality, and the multidimensional measures used by those who adhered to this approach, came under severe attack. Criticisms can be grouped into two general categories. First, many multidimensional measures, such as the LWMAT and the DAS, were criticized for combining scales assessing objective reports of interaction, which

are dyadic measures, with subjective evaluations of the relationship, which are individual measures. This is problematic because it combines two different units of analysis. Additionally, it combines two different types of reports (objective and subjective). This presents serious threats to the validity of such scales. Second, multidimensional measures were criticized because the components that are frequently included may actually be determinants of subjective evaluations of marital satisfaction. These factors, such as communication or couple interaction, also could be considered as independent variables that might influence marital satisfaction. Critics pointed out that by including both evaluative judgments about marital quality and reports of specific behaviors and general interaction patterns, multidimensional measures also may inflate associations between marital satisfaction and self-report measures of interpersonal processes in marriage. This is particularly problematic when dealing with cross-sectional data. The criticisms of multidimensional measures raised in the 1970s led many researchers to conclude that scales assessing different dimensions of marital quality should not be summed up and to develop new measures.

In response to the criticisms of the interpersonal and multidimensional approach to conceptualizing marital satisfaction, scholars began to take an intrapersonal and unidimensional approach in the 1980s. This approach also was prompted by the fact that many of the large nationally representative data sets that were available in the 1980s contained only unidimensional measures of marital quality. According to the intrapersonal approach, marital satisfaction should be conceived of as reflecting a person's subjective evaluation of the marital relationship, rather than the reported quality of interaction between two spouses. Scholars who take this approach typically employ the terms *marital satisfaction*, *marital happiness*, or *marital quality*, rather than *marital adjustment*.

Scholars who take the intrapersonal approach to marital satisfaction most often use unidimensional, global evaluative assessments of the relationship. Unidimensional measures take the individual (rather than the dyad) as the unit of analysis and are subjective reports of attitudes (rather than objective reports of behaviors). Frequently used unidimensional measures include the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMSS), the Marital Satisfaction Scale (MSS), and the Quality of Marriage Index (QMI).

Although unidimensional measures have not suffered the same degree of criticism as multidimensional measures of marital quality, two major shortcomings have been identified. First, unidimensional measures are criticized for being subject to considerable social desirability response bias. There have been some attempts to measure the extent to which these measures are contaminated by social desirability response bias and to control for it, but there is not yet agreement about the best way to do that. A second criticism of global measures is that they tend to be significantly skewed toward a positive evaluation. This makes analysis of the dependent variable difficult because there is often little variance.

During the 1990s, the lack of consensus regarding how to conceptualize and measure marital satisfaction persisted. At this time, many scholars began to employ the term *marital quality*. Some researchers used this term interchangeably with *marital satisfaction* or *marital happiness*. However, other scholars began to use *marital quality* in a broader sense and included multiple measures (e.g., both marital satisfaction and marital conflict), but treated them as separate dimensions rather than creating a summary index as earlier scholars had done. Frank Fincham and colleagues

suggest that marital quality contains separate positive and negative dimensions. Drawing on recent research in the areas of attitudes and affect, they argue that people may feel both positively and negatively about their marriages and that these feelings may change independently over time. These scholars use the terms *positive marital quality* (PMQ) and *negative marital quality* (NMQ) to distinguish between these two dimensions and create a fourfold typology of marital quality: satisfied (high PMQ and low NMQ), ambivalent (high PMQ and high NMQ), indifferent (low PMQ and low NMQ), and distressed or dissatisfied (low PMQ and high NMQ). It remains to be seen whether this two-dimensional approach will be widely adopted by marital researchers, though. The debate regarding how to conceptualize and measure this important construct has not been resolved.

Disagreement regarding how to conceptualize and measure marital quality and the diversity of academic disciplines represented among those who study marital satisfaction, have both contributed to the failure of scholars to develop a guiding theoretical perspective while studying marital satisfaction. Early theoretical attempts consisted primarily of drawing propositions from existing, general theories, such as Attachment, Social Exchange, or Role Theories, or of developing middle-range theories, such as Robert Lewis and Graham Spanier's Exchange Theory of Marital Quality. In the 1980s, marital quality research tended to be atheoretical, as scholars struggled to resolve the controversies surrounding how to measure and conceptualize marital satisfaction. In the 1990s, scholars began to expand their areas of inquiry beyond individual and interpersonal factors that may influence marital satisfaction to take a more ecological approach, considering the contexts in which individual and interpersonal processes occur as well.

Causes and Correlates of Marital Satisfaction

The investigation of determinants of marital satisfaction and marital quality has occupied a central place in marital research for many decades. However, over time, the focus of such research has changed. In the 1940s, much of the work investigated how personality characteristics might influence marital satisfaction. In the 1950s, scholars shifted their attention to interactional styles, which spurred the development of the multidimensional measures of marital satisfaction (or marital adjustment) described earlier. The movement of women out of the home and into the workplace shaped the work of scholars in the 1980s and 1990s, when factors such as role conflict, the division of household labor, women's employment, and power were widely investigated for their relationship to marital satisfaction. Conflict resolution and violence also emerged as factors investigated during this time.

More recently, scholars have begun to take a more complicated approach to understanding the factors that may be related to marital satisfaction by trying to identify both mediating and moderating variables. A moderating variable is a variable upon which a relationship between an independent and dependent variable is contingent. For instance, the link between marital satisfaction and certain factors, such as conflict and sexual satisfaction, appears to be contingent on the gender of the spouse. Other factors, such as race/ethnicity, age, and relationship stage also have been considered as possible moderators. Recent research also has attempted to understand the role of mediating, or intervening variables, on marital satisfaction. For instance, depression may lead to more negativity in relationships (a mediating variable), thereby impacting marital satisfaction indirectly.

Because of the vast number of studies into the causes and correlates of marital satisfaction and marital quality, it is impossible to summarize all their findings. However, several excellent reviews have set out to accomplish this task. Each decade since 1970, the *Journal of Marriage and the Family* has published such a review, offering an overview of findings from the previous decade. This entry offers only a brief introduction to some of the key findings regarding causes and correlates of marital satisfaction.

One of the most intensely studied topics in marital satisfaction research has been the influence of children, family stage, and duration of the marriage on marital satisfaction. In a review of studies conducted during the 1960s, scholars reported that one of the most surprising findings of that decade was that children appear to detract from the marital quality of their parents. The transition to parenthood continued to be a popular topic of study during the 1970s. Several cross-sectional studies identified a curvilinear relationship between family stage and marital satisfaction, whereby the average quality is higher in the preparental and postparental stages. The most common interpretation of this finding was that it reflected the addition of children to the family, their maturation, and their departure. However, longitudinal studies have suggested that changes often attributed to the transition to parenthood are duration-of-marriage effects instead. Some of these studies suggest that rather than being curvilinear, marital quality declines sharply during the first few years of marriage and then tapers off more slowly. The impact of children on marital satisfaction continues to be a topic of inquiry among scholars. A recent meta-analytic review of research into the link between parenthood and marital satisfaction concluded that parents report lower satisfaction than do non-parents, that the effect of parenthood is stronger for women than for men, that this effect is particularly strong for women with infants, and that the effect is stronger for more recent generations. The number of children and levels of satisfaction were also negatively correlated. This review offered support for the notion that children are linked to lower levels of satisfaction because of role conflict and restricted freedom.

The link between premarital cohabitation and marital satisfaction also has been the subject of a great deal of investigation in recent decades. A negative relationship between cohabitation and marital quality has been established, but it is unclear whether it is the living together or the type of people who tend to live together before marriage that is responsible for this effect. Research on remarriage also has increased sharply in the past 20 years and much of it has focused on marital satisfaction. This research indicates that the average marital satisfaction is slightly greater in first marriages than in remarriages after divorce. It also appears that the average satisfaction in remarriages is somewhat higher for men than for women.

Wives' employment, spouses' gender role attitudes, the division of household labor, and perceived equality also have received a great deal of attention recently. It seems that congruency between spouses' attitudes toward gender roles, as well as congruency between attitudes and behaviors, are related to marital satisfaction. A shared division of household labor and perceived fairness of the division of household labor also seem to enhance marital satisfaction, especially for wives.

Thomas Bradbury and colleagues organized their review of marital quality research conducted in the 1990s around two themes: interpersonal processes and sociocultural contexts within which marriages operate. These authors stated that research conducted during the 1980s and 1990s supported the conclusion that spouses' attributions (or

causal statements) for marital events are linked to marital satisfaction. Spouses that employ maladaptive attributions for negative partner behaviors have lower levels of marital satisfaction and use more negative behaviors during marital problem-solving discussions. Maladaptive attributions emphasize stable, internal, global characteristics rather than temporary, situational, specific characteristics. For instance, a wife who attributes her husband's late arrival to dinner as reflective of a stable personality characteristic, such as thoughtlessness or a lack of organization, rather than to a temporary, situational issue, such as heavy traffic or a busy day at work, is more likely to engage in negative behaviors during problem-solving discussions. The 1990s also saw a dramatic surge in research on the affective, or emotional, dimension of marital interaction. Although this research has demonstrated that affect is linked to marital quality, the exact nature of the relationship is not clear yet. For instance, some studies show that negative affect is harmful to marital quality, but other studies suggest that it enhances marital quality. Interaction patterns (especially the demand-withdraw pattern), physiology (e.g., the degree of physical arousal during marital interaction), social support, and violence also were identified as factors that are linked to marital satisfaction. In the latter half of their review, Thomas Bradbury and colleagues focus on contextual factors that are linked to marital quality. In particular, they discuss ways in which children, spouses' background and characteristics, life stressors and transitions, and neighborhood characteristics are related to marital quality.

The importance of understanding and measuring marital satisfaction and its influences stems primarily from the assumption that it is a key determinant of other important marital outcomes, such as marital stability (divorce and separation). Early marital researchers often assumed that marital satisfaction was predictive of marital stability. However, it became clear that given a certain level of marital satisfaction, some marriages would end in divorce and some would not. Spanier and Lewis identified four types of marriages: high quality/high stability, high quality/low stability, low quality/high stability, and low quality/low stability. Following the work of these scholars, several researchers have tried to identify factors that may moderate the relationship between marital quality and marital stability. External pressures (e.g., social pressure to remain married) and alternative attractions (e.g., availability of other mates) have been the focus of several studies.

Studies also show that marital satisfaction is positively related to other measures of individual well-being (e.g., life satisfaction, physical health). In the 1980s, some studies used marital satisfaction as an independent variable to predict the global well-being of married people, illustrating a strong positive link between the two. Although there has been some debate regarding the causal direction between these two variables, recent longitudinal research suggests that low marital quality is linked with lower levels of overall happiness, life satisfaction, self-esteem, and overall physical health. The authors of these studies suggest that marital satisfaction is a predictor of individual general well-being (rather than the other way around). Additionally, findings indicate that one spouse's marital satisfaction is linked to the well-being of the other spouse as well as the children's well-being.

Finally, in recent years, scholars have begun to examine how the concepts and findings from research on marital satisfaction might relate to the study of satisfaction within nonmarital relationships, such as unmarried heterosexual couples or same-sex couples. Thus far, it seems that many of the concepts and findings derived from studies of marital satisfaction also can be applied to satisfaction within other types of

committed sexual relationships.

In conclusion, despite the continuing debate about how to conceptualize and measure marital satisfaction and the difficulties constructing a unifying theory of marital satisfaction, a great deal has been discovered about what factors are linked to marital satisfaction. As scholars continue to explore moderators and mediators of these links, and to engage in longitudinal research identifying the directions of effects, our understanding of this important component of human relationships will become even clearer.

- marital satisfaction
- marital satisfaction and quality
- satisfaction
- measuring satisfaction
- division of labor in households
- spouses
- satisfaction in relationships

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See also

- [Happiness and Relationships](#)
- [Longitudinal Studies of Marital Satisfaction and Dissolution](#)
- [Marital Satisfaction, Assessment of](#)
- [Satisfaction in Relationships](#)

Further Readings

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