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Personality and Individual Differences 28 (2000) 917–928

PERSONALITY AND
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

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Marital satisfaction and spousal cost-infliction

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Received 20 November 1998; received in revised form 11 May 1999; accepted 12 June 1999

Abstract

This research tested the hypothesis that marital satisfaction is a psychological state regulated by evolved mechanisms that monitor spousal cost-infliction and benefits. Three separate data sources were used to study a sample of married couples. First, 214 participants provided information on their personality and marital satisfaction. Second, participants provided information on their spouse's personality, mate guarding and susceptibility to infidelity. Third, couples were interviewed by two interviewers, who subsequently provided independent ratings of each participant's personality. Results indicate that costs associated with spouse's personality, mate guarding and susceptibility to infidelity negatively correlate with participants' marital satisfaction. Discussion evaluates the utility of an evolutionary perspective on marital satisfaction and spousal cost-infliction. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Personality; Infidelity; Marital satisfaction; Evolutionary psychology

1. Introduction

Marriage has been documented in every known culture (Brown, 1991). More than 90% of the world's population will marry at least once (Epstein & Guttman, 1984). Most societies also have instituted divorce procedures (Brown, 1991). The ubiquity of marriage and divorce suggests the potential utility of an evolutionary perspective for understanding marital satisfaction. From an evolutionary perspective (Buss, 1989, 1999), marital satisfaction can be

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viewed as a psychological state regulated by mechanisms that monitor the benefits and costs of marriage to a particular person. The costs and benefits are gauged psychologically, but the mechanisms that gauge them have been forged over the vast expanse of evolutionary time. At an ultimate level, therefore, these mechanisms monitor what would have been costs and benefits in ancestral times. A spouse who commits a sexual infidelity, for example, inflicts on their partner a probabilistic cost of lowered paternity or diversion of resources. Infidelity, therefore, can be expected to lower the partner's marital satisfaction because marital satisfaction monitors costs of this sort. Marital dissatisfaction might function to motivate the individual to attempt to change the existing relationship, or to seek another one that may be more beneficial (Buss, 1989).

We tested several predictions derived from the hypothesis that marital satisfaction monitors spousal cost-infliction. We first identify spousal personality characteristics associated with cost-infliction and propose that these characteristics evoke dissatisfaction in a marriage partner. Next, we discuss spousal tactics of mate guarding and propose that tactics defined by cost-infliction will decrease marital satisfaction. Finally, we discuss infidelity as a cost inflicted by people on their spouses and propose that estimates of the probability of spousal infidelity reflect estimates of likely cost-infliction and, therefore, will decrease marital satisfaction.

1.1. Spousal personality characteristics

The five-factor model of personality (Norman, 1963) describes five dimensions that capture significant individual differences in personality. These bipolar factors are *urgency* (dominance, extraversion vs. submissiveness, introversion), *agreeableness* (warm, trusting vs. cold, suspicious), *conscientiousness* (reliable, well-organized vs. undependable, disorganized), *emotional stability* (secure, even-tempered vs. nervous, temperamental) and *openness/intellect* (perceptive, curious vs. imperceptive, uncurious). The most consistent predictor of marital dissatisfaction is a spouse's emotional instability (Buss, 1991; Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Low conscientiousness, low agreeableness and low openness/intellect also evoke dissatisfaction in a partner (Bentler & Newcomb, 1978; Buss, 1991).

A spouse with low emotional stability, low conscientiousness, low agreeableness and low openness/intellect inflicts many costs on a partner. Buss (1991) found that men and women married to people with these characteristics complain that their spouses are condescending, jealous, possessive, dependent, neglectful, unreliable, unfaithful, sexualizing of others, abusive of alcohol, emotionally constricted and self-centered. One design feature of psychology that may have been selected over human evolutionary history is the triggering of dissatisfaction with marriage to a spouse displaying disagreeableness, undependability, emotional instability or close-mindedness. Marital dissatisfaction might have prompted the unhappy spouse to defect from the costly relationship in search of a more beneficial one.

Prediction 1. Spousal disagreeableness, emotional instability, undependability and close-mindedness will negatively correlate with partner's marital satisfaction.

A spouse's unfaithfulness is likely to have had substantial reproductive costs for ancestral men and women (Buss, Larsen, Westen & Semmelroth, 1992). Because of the asymmetry in

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