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Factors characterizing marital conflict states and traits: physiological, affective, behavioral and neurotic variable contributions to marital conflict and satisfaction

D. G. Thomsen, D. G. Gilbert*

Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, IL, U.S.A.

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Abstract

Thirty-two married couples participated in conjoint-conflict-solving interactions while being videotaped and physiologically monitored. Intercorrelations between 13 variables (3 self-report, 6 observational and 4 physiological) produced six factors: Dominance, Neuroticism/Negative Affect, Affiliation/Positive Affect, Attentiveness, Physiological Arousal and Physiological Influence. Neuroticism/Negative Affect was inversely related to marital satisfaction. The Physiological Arousal factor was 'U'-shaped in its association with marital satisfaction (i.e. subjects with higher marital satisfaction exhibited synchrony in the activation of electrodermal and heart rate systems, whereas asynchrony [high activation in one system and low activation in the other] was more common in dissatisfied couples). These findings demonstrate the utility of combining personality, behavioral and physiological measures in characterizing and predicting marital satisfaction and conflict-related communication patterns. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Key words: Marital satisfaction; Personality; Physiology; Arousal; Neuroticism; Affect; Emotion; Attention

1. Introduction

Numerous inter- and intra-personal mechanisms have been implicated in the development of marital satisfaction (MS) vs dissatisfaction, including overt communication behaviors, affect, physiology and personality (Berscheid et al., 1984; Bradbury and Fincham, 1987; Eysenck and Wakefield, 1981; Gottman, 1994; Jacobson, 1985). Dissatisfied spouses exhibit fewer positive behaviors, more negative behaviors and reciprocate negative behaviors more readily than non-

* Corresponding author: Dr D. G. Gilbert, Department of Psychology, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901, U.S.A.

distressed spouses (Gottman, 1979; Jacobson et al., 1980; Markman, 1979, 1981). Affective measures are also good predictors of future marital satisfaction (MS) (Gottman, 1994; Markman, 1981). However, few studies have used a combination of these predictor measures. It has been frequently recommended that self-report, observational and physiological methods be jointly employed (the triple response approach) when assessing affect and other higher-order intra- and interpersonal constructs (Lang, 1971). In addition to correcting for method and error variance (Campbell and Fiske, 1959), an advantage of a triple-response approach is the convergence and divergence of information across the three domains. Despite these advantages, few marital studies have used triple-response methods.

Several studies demonstrated advantages of simultaneously assessing the three response domains. Gottman and Levenson (1984, 1986) found that physiological linkage between spouses (high husband-wife covariance of heart rate, skin conductance, pulse transmission time and somatic activity) during a marital conflict task correlated inversely with MS, accounting for 16% of the variance in a hierarchical regression after the effects of affect were partialled out. Gilbert et al. (1982) found that during marital interactions negative affect and accusatory content elicited larger skin conductance responses in the listening spouse than positive affect or neutral content. They also found that individuals scoring high in neuroticism responded with larger skin conductance responses to marital communications than did those low in neuroticism. Thus there are a number of potential advantages to adding physiological measures to more traditional self-report, personality and observational measures.

Four interpersonal dimensions are important in characterizing interpersonal conflict. These dimensions are dominance, attentiveness, engagement and affiliation-hostility. Gottman (1979) defines dominance as an asymmetry in the ability of one spouse's behavior to predict (and influence) that of the other. In contrast, the dominance factor of the Interaction Rating Scale (Thomsen, 1988) contains items characterizing individuals who are active, sure of themselves and keep control of the discussion by talking a great deal and using controlling statements. To the degree that dominant persons are more talkative and that talking is associated with cardiovascular arousal (Gilbert and Spielberger, 1987; Lynch et al., 1980), it stands to reason that controlling, talkative people are going to experience high degrees of cardiovascular arousal during social interactions and may be less attentive to their spouses (Gilbert, 1991).

Attentiveness is important in that a major complaint of distressed couples is that their spouse does not listen to them (Hawkins et al., 1980). Physiologically, there is evidence that attending behavior (i.e. non-defensive listening) is associated with decreased heart rate and other cardiovascular (CV) activity (Bittker et al., 1975; Lacey, 1959, 1967). As CV arousal increases, one's attention tends to shift away from external and toward internal stimuli, which may facilitate mood-state-congruent cognitions and attributions (Gilbert, 1991). On the other hand, listening-induced decreases in CV autonomic activation may be functional by allowing the individual to return to an efficient level of arousal and avoid dysfunctional emotional-state-dependent cognitions (Gilbert, 1991). Additionally, attending behavior by the listener may have a positive effect on the speaker, who appreciates the attention and is not frustrated by interruptions. Therefore, Gilbert (1991) predicted that attentiveness is correlated with low levels of CV arousal during listening compared to talking epochs, with positive affect in both listener and speaker and with good problem-solving and marital satisfaction.

Engagement, the third higher-order factor, corresponds to level of interpersonal involvement

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