TRAJECTORIES OF LIFE SATISFACTION IN LONG-TERM MARRIAGES

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THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH AIMS

The protective effects of marriage for well-being and health are well established. Recent research suggests that these effects are conditional upon the quality of the marriage (Carr, Freedman, Conman, & Schwarz, 2014). However, little is known about the link between marital quality and life satisfaction in long-term marriages and whether it varies with age. Especially in older age, health problems and marital strain could have a negative impact on life satisfaction.

The present research

This study focuses on trajectories of life satisfaction, considering two age groups of happily and unhappily married individuals. It builds up on results from a longitudinal project, where patterns and predictors of well-being are examined.

Aims

• To explore trajectories of life satisfaction over 3 waves (i.e. from t1 to t3) in happily and unhappily married persons of middle and older age.
• To examine the predictive power of intrapersonal resources, marital history and socio-demographic variables at t1 on life satisfaction at t3.

Hypotheses

Based on existing research (e.g., Proulx et al., 2007; Margelisch et al., 2015), we expect:

• A decline of life satisfaction in the group of unhappily married individuals over the years, because of the accumulation of stressors and challenges.
• A stable life satisfaction in the group of happily married individuals over the years, because of the protective potential of a good marital quality.
• Marital happiness at t1 remains a significant predictor of life satisfaction and marital stability at t3 even when considering marital stressors, intrapersonal resources and demographic variables.

METHODS

Data stem from the longitudinal, survey-based study with three measurement points (2012, 2014, 2016), which are a part of the Swiss National Centre of Competence in Research ‘LIVES’ (funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation).

Sample: 443 persons (196 men; 247 women), aged 40-92 (M = 68.07, SD = 13.04) in a long-term first marriage (M = 42.29, SD = 12.67).

Statistical analyses (ANOVA with repeated measures and hierarchical regression) were carried out with IBM SPSS Statistics 23.0.

RESULTS

Trajectories of life satisfaction

Results from the ANOVA (controlled for subjective health), with life satisfaction as the depend variable, revealed a significant effect for group (F(3,419) = 30.09, p < .001; partial η² = 0.16), but no main effects for time (F(2,838) = 1.82, p = .16) or group by time interaction (F(6,838) = 1.04, p= .40). The two age groups within the happily and unhappily married showed no significant difference. At all three time points, happily married persons reported higher life satisfaction than unhappily married persons.

Predictors of life satisfaction

Table 1: Multivariate Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Life Satisfaction

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<th>Variables/Instruments</th>
<th>Outcome Variable</th>
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<td>Life Satisfaction</td>
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Discussion

The trajectories of life satisfaction of the unhappily and the happily long-term married persons remained stable over time: Happily married persons showed higher life satisfaction in comparison with unhappily married persons at all three time points.

As expected, higher levels of life satisfaction were best predicted by higher values of intrapersonal resources (subjective health and resilience) and marital history (happily married and less relationship strain).

Our results demonstrate that marital quality in a long-term marriage has far-reaching implications for well-being. When future time horizons of the spouses become more limited and individual’s friendship networks diminishes, spouses may gain more co-reliant on each other. Therefore, marital quality plays a significant role on life satisfaction.

Knowledge about the stable association between marital quality and life satisfaction could be of great help for designing relationship educations interventions (e.g., by promoting strengths of the partnership, improving interaction and effective communication) and by fostering resilience.

References


Klann et al., 2006

Diener et al., 1985

Wagnild & Young, 1993

Resilience Scale RS-11 (Wagnild & Young, 1993)

Subjective Health: original item

Resilience: Resilience Scale RS-11 (Wagnild & Young, 1993)

Marital Satisfaction: Marital Satisfaction Inventory revised (Klann et al., 2006)

Marpal happiness: original item

Relationship strain: original item