
Marriage in the Later Years: A Review of Factors That Affect Marital Satisfaction among Older Adults

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Older Americans represent the fastest growing subset of the U.S. population. Although the general population tripled over the course of the last century, the population of those over 65 years of age increased by a factor of eleven (Friedrich, 2001). Furthermore, the U.S. Census Bureau predicts that this population will soar from 33 million in 1994 to more than 80 million by the middle of the 21st century (Hobbs, 2001). Despite this ongoing demographic shift, older adults are vastly under-represented in marital research (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994; Goodman, 1999a; Trudel, Turgeon, & Piche, 2000) and few theoretical models exist to explain fluctuations in marital satisfaction for this population (Herman, 1994).

Nonetheless, examining factors that affect marital satisfaction among older adults is an important endeavor. Research has demonstrated that marital discord among older couples is associated with negative mental health outcomes (Sandberg & Harper, 2000; Whisman, Uebelacker, Tolejko, Chatav, & McKelvie, 2006), physical health problems (Bookwala, 2005), and even higher mortality rates (Impens, 2005). Conversely, high quality marriages in this age group mitigate the negative psychological effects of conditions such as disability (Bookwala &

Franks, 2005; Mancini & Bonanno, 2006), and are associated with better physical health (Trief et. al., 2006) and overall life satisfaction (Marshall, 2001; Shen & Wang, 2002).

Current research on elderly marital satisfaction provides mixed support for various lifespan relationship trajectories. To consolidate knowledge and identify areas for future research, this article reviews existing literature in three domains: retirement, emotional support, and intimacy. After a brief description of theoretical perspectives, the effect of each domain on marital satisfaction will be examined. Research and practice implications will also be discussed.

Marital Satisfaction Trajectories

Within the marriage literature, three developmental perspectives emerge on marital satisfaction across the lifespan (Herman, 1994). The first approach suggests a *curvilinear pattern* in which marital satisfaction starts out at high levels in the early years of marriage (“honeymoon phase”), declines during the middle years, and then rebounds in later life (Rollins & Feldman, 1970). The resultant rise in marital satisfaction among older adults does not reach the level of satisfaction during the honeymoon phase, but does represent a significant improvement after the challenges of the middle years have passed (e.g., child-rearing, financial planning, etc.).

The second approach—*steady decline perspective*—suggests that marital satisfaction decreases across the lifespan (Bradbury, Fincham, & Beach, 2000). After reaching lifetime highs in the early years, marital satisfaction starts a steady decline in the middle years. Rather than a blissful era of leisure and companionship, marital satisfaction in the later years continues a downward trajectory and reaches a lifetime low due to various issues (e.g., deteriorating health).

The third view—*no change perspective*—holds that there are no significant or consistent changes in marital satisfaction later in life (Herman, 1994). Although a proportion of older couples is more dissatisfied with their marriages than younger couples, an equal proportion of older couples are more satisfied if not more satisfied than their younger counterparts. In other words, “...the latter years of life are no more or less maritally satisfying than any other phase of life” (Herman, 1994, p. 75). Support for each of these marital career trajectories will be considered within each domain.

Factors Affecting Elderly Marital Satisfaction

Retirement

Retirement from a primary career has been characterized by some researchers as being a very stressful event that has negative effects on marital satisfaction in older couples (Trudel, 2000). Because of the increased amount of time spent together during retirement, unresolved conflicts from earlier stages of the marital career can be exacerbated. Furthermore, retirement often involves a redefinition of household roles with husbands assuming a larger share of traditionally feminine tasks (Dorfman & Heckert, 1988; Kulik, 2001). While one might assume that a more egalitarian arrangement would be conducive to higher levels of marital satisfaction, women often express dissatisfaction after their husbands retire due in part to the rearrangement of household routines, a form of territorial invasion (Hill & Dorfman, 1982). For men, marital burnout has been positively correlated with equality of in-home tasks (Kulik, 2002). Thus, some retirement research supports the *steady decline perspective* for older adults.

Alternatively, another retirement study supports the *no change perspective* on marital satisfaction. Fitzpatrick and Vinick (2003) conducted a longitudinal study of 61 married couples in the greater Boston metropolitan area using the well-known and validated Dyadic Adjustment

Scale. The researchers found that in general, husbands' retirement had little effect upon wives' marital satisfaction or on wives' perceptions of marital quality. Rather than sparking a crisis, retirement was seen as a manageable process or transition.

Yet other research provides support for the *curvilinear perspective* as post-retirement changes in the division of labor at home can have positive effects as well. Kulik (2001) conducted a study of 469 Israeli couples and examined division of tasks, power relations, and quality of marriage. Kulik found that couples with two retired spouses were highly egalitarian in the division of labor and that retired couples expressed higher levels of marital satisfaction than pre-retired couples. A subsequent study by Kulik (2002) evaluated equity theory and found that perceptions of equality in family roles and power relations were associated with lower levels of marital burnout and higher levels of marital satisfaction for the wives only.

Emphasizing the importance of a life course perspective, Moen, Kim and Hofmeister (2001) examined marital satisfaction for a 534 person subsample of the multiple wave Cornell Retirement and Well-Being Study. The researchers found that the actual retirement transition is related to significant declines in marital satisfaction for both husbands and wives, and that retirement from a primary career is the strongest negative predictor of marital quality for men. However, after an adjustment period of more than two years, marital satisfaction levels rebound to pre-retired levels if not higher, and retirement actually promotes marital quality and leads to a dramatic reduction in marital conflict (Moen et al., 2001). When viewed as a process occurring over time rather than a single event, retirement appears to have a negative effect in the short term but a positive effect in the long term.

Emotional Support and Communication Patterns

Unlike retirement which is a transitional phase, emotional support and communication patterns involve interpersonal exchanges over the course of the lifetime. Carstensen, Gottman and Levenson (1995) explored the emotional climate of long-term marriages by using an experimental design involving laboratory observations of 156 couples who differed in age and marital satisfaction. Interestingly, older couples displayed more affection and less emotional negativity during conflict resolution exercises, were less likely to initiate negative sequences leading to argument escalation, and showed lower levels of anger, disgust, and belligerence than younger counterparts. After controlling for differences in marital satisfaction, the researchers concluded that "there is evidence suggesting an age-related positive affective trend within this highly intimate social relationship" (p. 146). Instead of the popular notion of emotional dampening in later years, research suggests that older couples may actually benefit from more sophisticated communication patterns than younger couples.

Both social support and emotional reciprocity appear to be key components of marital satisfaction. Based on self-reports of 80 couples ranging in age from 43 to 83, Goodman (1999b) found evidence that emotional reciprocity is associated with more positive marital evaluations. The results were strongest and most consistent for women. Conversely, imbalanced or closed communication patterns among older couples have been linked to lower levels of marital satisfaction (Hodgson, Shields, & Rousseau, 2003). Another study found that social support from spouses (i.e., giving and receiving emotional support) was strongly related to marital satisfaction and well-being among older wives (Acitelli et al., 1994). Finally, Wright and Aquilino (1998) examined levels of reciprocity and emotional exchange between older caregiving spouses and found that both variables were linked to higher levels of marital happiness and lower levels of caregiving burden. Although there is not definitive evidence that

emotional closeness and communication improve later in life, older couples that have supportive, open, and positive communication styles experience higher marital satisfaction.

Intimacy

As one form of intimacy, sexual relations between older spouses represent an important dimension of marital satisfaction. Nonetheless, these couples commonly face obstacles in this area including physiological changes (e.g., testosterone decreases, menopause), diseases (e.g., cardiopulmonary, vascular, neurological) and medications (e.g., anti-depressants, anti-Parkinson drugs) that can decrease sexual desire or functioning (Trudel, Turgeon, & Piche, 2000). These facts support the *steady decline perspective*.

Contrary to popular misconceptions, however, attitudes towards love have been shown to persist across the major stages of the lifespan (Montgomery & Sorell, 1997). Furthermore, after a comprehensive review of literature on sexuality and aging, Trudel and colleagues (2000) concluded that “sexuality is...one of the last faculties to decline” (p. 382) and that sexual satisfaction takes on expanded forms among older adults, including a heightened appreciation for physical connection and touch. These factors provide some support for the *no change perspective*.

Schiavi, Mandeli, and Schreiner-Engel (1994) conducted a study that focused specifically on the sexual satisfaction in healthy aging men and found that although the oldest age group in the study had significantly lower scores in terms of sexual experience and drive, there were no age-related changes in terms of sexual enjoyment or satisfaction. This led the authors to conclude that researchers should move beyond an exclusive focus on sexual performance, and instead explore other determinants of sexual enjoyment and satisfaction in late life.

By broadening the definition of intimacy to include dimensions beyond sex (e.g., social, emotional, or intellectual intimacy), researchers have gained additional insight into marital satisfaction among older couples. Goodman (1999a) analyzed partner intimacy, autonomy, and marital satisfaction within long-term marriages and confirmed that intimacy was positively related to marital satisfaction among all age groups. Surprisingly, however, older respondents in long-term marriages rated partners higher in intimacy than younger counterparts. Harper, Shaalje, and Sandberg (2000) addressed the relationship between daily stress, intimacy, and marital quality in mature marriages and found that intimacy actually promoted resilience by significantly mediating common stresses (e.g., deteriorating health, role redefinition, etc.). Finally, Svetlik and colleagues (2005) examined predictors of relationship loss in a study of 136 older caregivers of physically and cognitively impaired spouses. They found that “...when couples...can adapt to physiological changes and find ways to satisfy their needs for physical affection and sexual intimacy, they will evaluate their overall relationship more favorably, be less distressed, and...provide better care” (Svetlik et. al., 2005, p. 76). Thus, expanded forms of intimacy profoundly affect older couples, providing some support for the *no change* and *curvilinear perspectives*.

Research and Practice Implications

In addition to the general need for more scholarly attention to the topic (Acitelli et al., 1994; Goodman, 1999a; Trudel et al., 2000), several methodological improvements in future research will expand our understanding of marital satisfaction and aging. First, more longitudinal research is needed to accurately evaluate marital satisfaction across the lifespan. Also, rather than treating all individuals over 65 years of age as one monolithic group, more

sophisticated models of marital satisfaction need to be developed with substages (Herman, 1994). Second, future research needs to examine marital satisfaction and aging within different reference groups (e.g., racial, ethnic, socio-economic), family structures (e.g., blended families, grandparents raising grandchildren, etc.), and relationships types (i.e., remarried, cohabitating, and/or gay/lesbian couples). Although some research suggests unique patterns of marital satisfaction within specific ethnic groups (Markides et al., 1999), most studies to date have used predominately white, middle class, heterosexual participants. Third, to improve our global understanding of marital satisfaction, existing research in other countries as diverse as France (Fouquereau & Baudoin, 2002), China (Shen & Wang, 2002), and Israel (Kulik, 2002) needs to be integrated with research on American couples. Last, several emerging trends (e.g., volunteerism, second careers, in-home healthcare, assisted living facilities) were beyond the scope of this paper, but will likely impact many aspects of marital satisfaction and deserve scholarly consideration.

The literature on marital satisfaction among older adults offers several suggestions for clinical practice as well. Because many standard assessments of marital satisfaction contain items irrelevant to older persons (e.g., job ambitions, family planning) or omit items important to them (e.g., health, aging, financial difficulties) (Henry, Miller, & Giarrusso, 2005), empirically valid measurements need to be developed for this population (Clements & Swenson, 1999). Additionally, in order to effectively treat both older individuals and couples, therapists and service providers need to be knowledgeable about common marital problems and solutions unique to this age group. These practitioners often inadvertently promote inappropriate age standards and age-related stereotypes by underestimating problems such as substance abuse (Ivy, Wieling & Harris, 2000) or avoiding sensitive topics such as sexuality (Svetlik et al., 2005) with older clients. Curriculum changes in clinical training programs and professional development workshops that incorporate gerontological findings will improve service delivery to older clients. Empirical research on this population can generate knowledge with valuable clinical implications.

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