

Interpersonal communication in couple relationships

Ionela-Bianca Coman^{1*}, Adina Karner-Huțuleac¹

Abstract: Interpersonal communication is an object of study with a much greater importance than the study of other spheres of human behavior, because the basis of relational satisfaction is an effective communication between the two partners. The present study aims to investigate whether there is a link between the type of communication and relational satisfaction. We also aim to see if there are differences in relational satisfaction between men and women and whether age influences the level of satisfaction. The research was conducted on a sample of 127 participants. All participants were in a relationship at the time of completing the questionnaires. The results show that effective communication influences the level of satisfaction in the couple. At the end of the paper we mention a number of limitations of this research as well as future research directions (e.g., a qualitative approach using observation to assess the type of communication that couples use).

Keywords: Relational satisfaction, Effective communication, Gender, Age

Introduction

Marriage has been described as the most important and fundamental relationship between individuals because it provides the primary structure for forming a family (Larson & Holman, 1994) The tendency of people to seek the company of their fellows is characteristic of most individuals. This is due to our need for sociability. The presence of sociability is a basic condition for the development of an appropriate social behavior. The need for affiliation of the individual is so pressing because it gives meaning to our lives. People need to feel loved, appreciated and want to spend a lot of time in the company of others.

Ana Stoica-Constantin (2004) defines marital relationships as emotional, romantic relationships or sexual relationships in which partners live together, share their property and are publicly identified and identify as a couple. During

¹ Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences, Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Iași, Romania

* E-mail of corresponding author: comanbianca.psih@gmail.com

the marital relationship, the two spouses may face either an increase or a decrease in marital satisfaction due to various factors.

Satisfaction is defined as a state of happiness that transcends pain. In order to be able to measure satisfaction with an event or with a person and even with life, an individual tends to consider all environmental influences, emotions, aspirations, disappointments, expectations and fulfillment of personal goals and then determine if the positive exceeds the negative. Individuals tend to self-assess their own level of satisfaction, which is why this process becomes subjective and personal (Ward et al., 2009).

Thus, individuals who experience happiness in the relationships with their partners also have an emotional state of high relational satisfaction (Ward et al., 2009). At the level of common sense, relational satisfaction is defined by the absence of conflicts that make problematic a coexistence between partners and by the subjective impression of happiness present in the two spouses. It is also presented as a state of emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual well-being.

Murray and colleagues (1996) obtained significant results in their research on the influence of one partner's perception of the other on the level of relational satisfaction. Thus, the research shows that the perception of the partner as ideal increases the level of relational satisfaction.

The studies from this field have focused on the relationship between relational satisfaction and communication between partners. Effective communication involves total emotional openness and full trust in the partner. It is not love that keeps two people together in the long run, but the respect that exists between them; the possible reciprocity of the exchanges between them and the vitality of the messages they send to each other (Lavner et al., 2016). So, when we talk about effective communication, we automatically talk about respect, reciprocity, open and sincere attitude. Effective communication is essential for building and maintaining strong relationships. Communication includes more than words and grammar. In fact, the emotional layer of communication can be of utmost importance for couples. There is growing evidence that couples build intimacy, although there are hundreds of very ordinary and mundane moments in which they try to make emotional connections (Driver & Gottman, 2004). Communication involves connecting by sharing information or resources, asking for support or comfort, forming alliances, conveying emotions, or making changes in their environment.

Studies show that the level of relational satisfaction has been positively correlated with the quality and quantity of verbal and nonverbal interpersonal communication, with the skills for constructive communication between the two spouses, with the degree to which spouses agree that their relationship is a happy one (Blood & Wolfe, 1960). Partners who communicate little or inefficiently, who

do not listen to their partner, end up considering the marriage as unsatisfactory. The results of the research conducted by du Plooy and de Beer (2018) highlighted the fact that among the activities that influence the high level of relational satisfaction is communication, even small discussions between partners.

Robinson and Blanton (1993) highlighted the following basic conditions of a happy marriage: intimacy, commitment, communication, harmony and sharing the same religious values. The authors also noted a positive correlation between relational satisfaction and the following aspects: similar religious orientations of partners, the ability to resolve conflicts in the relationship, concordance on financial decisions of partners, choosing the same leisure activities, the existence of children.

A synthesis of the characteristics specific to happy couples was made by Knox and Schacht (2010), which includes twelve elements: 1. personal and emotional involvement in staying married; 2. common interests as well as values, common goals, care for children, desire to be together; 3. communication between partners; 4. religiosity - a strong religious orientation provides the couple with social, spiritual and emotional support from other parishioners in the parish and, at the same time, benefits from moral guidance in solving the problems they face; 5. trust in the partner; 6. nonmaterialism; 7. to have positive role models in their parents; 8. mutual sexual attraction; 9. fairness of the relationship - the modern attitude towards social genders and the increase in the equal decision-making process have led to an increase in the level of happiness in today's couples; 10. absence of negative attributions - no negative reasons are attributed to the partner's behaviors; 11. forgiveness - allows spouses to move on; 12. economic security - although money does not bring happiness, a secure, stable economic base is associated by various researchers with increasing the quality of married life.

A 2016 study by Lavner and colleagues showed that a high level of satisfaction is associated with better communication. Thus, partners who have a positive, effective communication are more satisfied with their relationship. Also, the age of the partners in the marriage has an important impact on the quality and stability of their marital relationship. Iluț (2005) came to the following conclusion: the younger you are when you get married, the more likely you are to divorce. The most vulnerable marriages are those of teenagers. The above-mentioned author considers that this phenomenon can be explained by appealing to one or more of the following reasons: the process of social and emotional maturation is incomplete, partner information is insufficient, income level is low (probably married partners abandoned the educational process), marital capital is restricted. Also, people who marry at a very "young" age are less prepared emotionally and psychologically to select the optimal life partner and play the marital role.

The research conducted by Candela and Turluc (2019) on the Romanian population highlighted the fact that couple's daily conversations can be

categorized into 12 categories: instrumental, leisure, affection, catching up, planning, relationship, family, private concerns, conflict, and children.

Regarding gender differences, the results indicated that, in the case of women, relational satisfaction is lower than that of their husbands, but it is not a significant difference (Jackson et al., 2014). In the study by Fugl-Meyer and colleagues (2002) it was observed that gender does not influence satisfaction. Also, the study by Tiefenbach and Kohlbacher (2013) supports the same idea that there are no differences between men and women in terms of satisfaction.

We set out to study whether gender, age, and type of communication influence relational satisfaction. We formulated the following hypotheses:

1. The type of communication influences relational satisfaction, in the sense that the participants using effective communication show higher satisfaction than the participants using inefficient communication.

2. Gender influences relational satisfaction, in the sense that the men have high satisfaction than women.

3. The age of the participants influences the relational satisfaction, in the sense participants aged between 16-25 years old have significantly higher scores than those over 25 years old.

Method

Participants

127 participants took part in this research, out of which 57 males and 70 females, aged between 16 and 45 years old. Out of a total of 127 participants, 52 participants were married and 75 participants were in a relationship. Out of the total number of participants, 80 participants came from urban areas and 47 from rural areas.

We did not consider it necessary for both partners of the couple to complete this questionnaire since it includes questions that address their own ability to communicate and the individual's perception of the other's ability to communicate.

Measures

The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS, Spanier, 1976) is a 32-item assessment tool that can be completed by either one or both partners in a relationship. Each DAS item is evaluated by a single answer, which is chosen from a list.

The DAS includes 4 subscales: (a) Consensus in the couple, (b) Satisfaction in the couple, (c) Cohesion in the couple, (d) Affective expression. Each item is scored on a single subscale. A total adjustment score is also calculated by summing the scores of the four subscales. The standards are made separately for divorced and married couples. DAS can be completed in about 5-10 minutes. According to the test administration rules, each partner is presented with a set of

items and each partner is then asked to assess the extent to which the behavior described by these items is present in their couple relationship, using the appropriate response options. To answer the questions in the questionnaire, the subject can choose an answer on the Likert scale from 1 to 5, where 1 means never and 5 means always. The value of the alpha cronbach fidelity coefficient in our case is .722, higher than the minimum accepted value of .70.

Communication Questionnaire (Locke et al., 1956) comprises 25 items and is designed to assess the efficiency / inefficiency of communicating partners involved in a dyadic relationship. It has viable psychometric properties, with Alpha Cronbach's values of 0.923.

The reason why we considered it necessary to apply the communication questionnaire was that it allowed the investigation of a relatively large number of subjects, the collection of rich material on aspects of verbal and nonverbal communication between couples and also the data obtained were suitable for quantitative analysis

The 25 items include aspects of verbal and nonverbal communication in couples, and also include aspects related to:

- the individual's perception about his/her own communication ability;
- the perception of the individual about the communication capacity of the other.

The questionnaire was designed in a five-step quantification system, with one point being awarded for the absence of the manifestation of the respective behavior and five points for the frequent manifestation of the respective behavior. A person who gets a high score on this scale means that he has a high level of communication effectiveness and a person who gets a low score on this scale means that he has a low level of communication effectiveness.

The value of the alpha cronbach coefficient in our study is .915.

Procedure

The questionnaires were applied to a group of 127 subjects. The research took place between 22.02.2018 - 12.05.2018. Participants completed the questionnaires in Google Forms. Research participants were invited to read instruction and if they did not agree to participate in this study they could leave the link at any time. 14 participants were eliminated due to incomplete answers provided (initially they were 141 participants). Subjects were guaranteed the confidentiality of their answers.

Results

Hypothesis 1

To test the first hypothesis, we used the T test for two independent samples (see Table 1). According to the results ($t(122.19) = 2.73$; $p = .007$), there are significant differences between people in the condition of effective communication and people in the condition of ineffective communication in terms of relational satisfaction. The division of the participants into the two groups was made according to the median. Thus, people in the condition of ineffective communication have, on average, lower scores at relational satisfaction ($M = 87.18$) compared to people in the condition of effective communication ($M = 92.08$).

Table 1. T test for independent samples comparing relational satisfaction based on communication

| Variable | N | M | SD | t | df | p |
|---------------------------|----|-------|-------|------|--------|------|
| Inefficient communication | 49 | 87.18 | 7.00 | 2.73 | 122.19 | .007 |
| Efficient communication | 78 | 92.08 | 13.17 | | | |

Hypothesis 2

To test the second hypothesis we used the *t*-test for two independent samples. According to the results obtained ($t(125) = .14$; $p = .88$), there are no differences between males and females in terms of relational satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3

To test the third hypothesis we used the T test for two independent samples ($t(125) = .09$; $p = .92$). According to the results obtained, there are no significant differences between people under 25 and those over 25 in terms of relational satisfaction.

Discussions

The purpose of this research was to investigate whether there is a link between the type of communication and relational satisfaction. At the same time, the research aimed to see if there are differences in relational satisfaction between men and women and whether age influences the level of satisfaction. To investigate these issues, we applied the questionnaires to a sample of 127 participants.

The first hypothesis of the study was to verify the differences between participants with effective communication and those with inefficient communication in terms of satisfaction. Following the statistical analyses, it was observed that people in the condition of efficient communication obtained on average higher scores on relational satisfaction. Our results are consistent with other research in the field that has considered studying the relationship between communication and relational satisfaction (Blood & Wolfe, 1960). Therefore, given the basic conditions for a happy marriage highlighted by Robinson and Blanton (1993), communication being an important condition, we can explain our results by the fact that partners who manage to relate in a constructive way are also more satisfied with relational relationship.

At the same time, in the synthesis made by Knox and Schacht (2010) which aims at the specific characteristics of happy couples, we find communication as a main characteristic. In other words, a more recent study from 2016 showed that partners who have positive communication are generally more satisfied with their relationship (Lavner et al., 2016).

Therefore, the results of our study sustain the results already existing in the literature in terms of the link between communication and satisfaction. Thus, we can say that effective communication is the foundation of a solid relationship in which both partners are satisfied with their relationship.

The other hypothesis of our study aimed to verify the relationship between gender and satisfaction as well as the idea that there are differences between age groups and satisfaction. According to the results obtained, males do not have a higher degree of satisfaction than females. Also, studies by Fugl-Meyer and colleagues (2002) and Tiefenbach and Kohlbacher (2013) have shown that gender does not influence relational satisfaction.

The results of hypothesis three suggested that partners aged between 16 and 25 years old do not have a higher degree of satisfaction compared to people aged between 25 and 45 years old. This result is also validated by the research conducted by Kutubaeva (2019) and Staptopé and colleagues (2014) regarding the fact that age does not influence the degree of satisfaction of partners.

Limits and future directions of research

A limitation of the present study is represented by the instruments used to measure the research variables. The instruments used to measure the variable are of self-report type. Being self-reporting instruments, people tend to provide desirable answers. Thus, we suggest using other ways to measure these variables (for example, a qualitative approach using observation to assess the type of communication that couples use). Another limitation refers to the small number of participants, which prevents us from generalizing the data. A study on a larger sample would be necessary in order to validate the results. It is also possible that

other variables interfere in explaining the phenomenon studied (for example, the presence of children – partners with children could have several sources of conflict related to children growth) (Candel & Turliuc, 2019). Notwithstanding the above limits of the current paper, the result contributes to the expansion of knowledge in this field of study.

Conclusions

This research aimed to study whether the type of communication, age and gender influence relational satisfaction. Our results showed that the type of communication is essential in terms of the harmony of the couple. Therefore, people who have an effective communication in the couple's relationship tend to understand the other, to avoid conflicts, to be satisfied with the status of their relationship. However, there is no difference between men and women in terms of relational satisfaction. Also, regarding the age of the partners, no difference was found on satisfaction. Considering all the limitations mentioned above, we believe that this research consolidates the information already existing in the literature.

References

- Blood, R. O., Jr., & Wolfe, D. M. (1960). *Husbands and wives: The dynamics of family living*. Free Press Glencoe.
- Candel, O. S., & Turliuc, M. N. (2019). What Do Romanian Couples Talk About on a Daily Basis? A Mixed Method Approach. *Revista de Cercetare si Interventie Sociala*, 67, 37-51. <https://doi.org/10.33788/rcis.67.3>
- du Plooy, K., & de Beer, R. (2018). Effective interactions: Communication and high levels of marital satisfaction. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 28(2), 161–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14330237.2018.1435041>
- Fugl-Meyer, A. R., Melin, R., & Fugl-Meyer, K. S. (2002). Life Satisfaction in 18-to 64-Year-Old Swedes: In Relation to Gender, Age, Partner and Immigrant Status. *Journal of rehabilitation medicine*, 34(5), 239-246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/165019702760279242>
- Iluț P., (2005). *Sociopsihologia și antropologia familiei*. Polirom.
- Jackson, J. B., Miller, R. B., Oka, M., & Henry, R. G. (2014). Gender differences in marital satisfaction: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 76(1), 105–129. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12077>
- Driver, J. L., & Gottman, J. M. (2004). Daily Marital Interactions and Positive Affect During Marital Conflict Among Newlywed Couples. *Family Process*, 43(3), 301–314. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1545-5300.2004.00024.x>
- Knox D., & Schacht C. (2010). *Choices in Relationships: An Introduction to Marriage and the Family* (Tenth Edition). Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
- Kutubaeva, R.Z. (2019). Analysis of life satisfaction of the elderly population on the example of Sweden, Austria and Germany. *Population and Economics* 3(3), 102-116. <https://doi.org/10.3897/popecon.3.e47192>

- Larson, J. H., & Holman, T. B. (1994). Premarital Predictors of Marital Quality and Stability. *Family Relations*, 43(2), 228–237. <https://doi.org/10.2307/585327>
- Lavner, J. A., Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (2016). Does couples' communication predict marital satisfaction, or does marital satisfaction predict communication? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 78(3), 680–694. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12301>
- Locke, H. J., Sabagh, G. & Thomes, M. M., (1956). Correlates of Primary Communication and Empathy. *Research Studies of the State College of Washington*, 24, 116-124.
- Murray, S. L., Holmes, J. G., & Griffin, D. W. (1996). The benefits of positive illusions: Idealization and the construction of satisfaction in close relationships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70(1), 79–98. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.1.79>
- Robinson L. C., & Blanton P. W. (1993). Marital Strengths in Enduring Marriage. *Family Relations*, 42(1), 38-45. <https://doi.org/10.2307/584919>
- Spanier, G. B. (1976). Measuring dyadic adjustment: New scales for assessing the quality of marriage and similar dyads. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 32(1), 15-28. <https://doi.org/10.2307/350547>
- Stephoe, A., Deaton, A., & Stone, A. A. (2015). Subjective wellbeing, health, and ageing. *The Lancet*, 385(9968), 640-648. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(13\)61489-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(13)61489-0)
- Stoica-Constantin, A. (2004). *Conflictul interpersonal: prevenire, rezolvare și diminuarea efectelor*. Polirom.
- Tiefenbach, T., & Kohlbacher, F. (2013). *Happiness from the Viewpoint of Economics: Findings from Recent Survey Data in Japan*. DIJ Working Paper 13/1.
- Ward P. J., Lundberg N. R., Zabriski R. B., & Berrett, K. (2009). Measuring marital satisfaction. A comparison of the revised dyadic adjustment scale and the satisfaction with married life scale. *Marriage and Family Review*, 45, 412-429. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01494920902828219>