

Handling of differences and marital satisfaction during childrearing

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Boston College

The Graduate School of Education

Department of Counseling, Developmental Psychology,
and Research Methods

HANDLING OF DIFFERENCES AND MARITAL SATISFACTION DURING
CHILDREARING

Dissertation

by

T. SHAWN SULLIVAN

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Abstract

Handling of differences and marital satisfaction during childrearing. T. Shawn Sullivan. Chair: Bernard A. O'Brien, Ph.D.

This study investigated the relationship between handling of differences in marriage and marital satisfaction during the childrearing stage of the family life cycle. The mediating effect of gender was also examined.

The sample included 120 spouses (60 couples) who had participated in a larger study of marital functioning and who were married for at least 20 years; who had at least one child; with the youngest child at least 18 years and/or out of high school; with no history of extensive marriage counseling or individual psychotherapy. Couples were recruited through a variety of community organizations. The sample was relatively diverse in regard to ethnicity/race, religious background, and education. Subjects were interviewed individually using a semi-structured protocol that asked about roles, needs, expectations, sense of relatedness to each other, conflicts, marriage fairness, as well as style of handling differences and marital satisfaction.

Results confirmed that there was a relationship between spouse's handling of differences and marital satisfaction; spouse's handling of differences, gender, and marital

satisfaction; and subject's handling of differences, spouse's handling of differences, gender and marital satisfaction. The results indicated a negative association between avoiding handling of differences in marriage and marital satisfaction. These findings highlighted the influence of gender on this association.

Chapter I

Introduction

Marriage has recently emerged as an important area of research in the social sciences for several reasons. Concern about the divorce rate in the United States and its effects on the quality of life is one of the most important reasons (O'Leary & Smith, 1991). Divorce rates in the United States rose sharply from the 1960s to the 1980s, and the rate is now at about 50% (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1990). The United States has the highest divorce rate among major industrialized countries of the world (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1990). The rise in divorce is particularly concerning given that between 90% and 95% of all Americans marry at least once (Lauer, Lauer, & Kerr, 1990). This trend is not without consequences. The United States has the world's highest per capita number of children living in single parent families (Zigler, 1985). A reported 20% of all children in the United States are in families headed by a single parent (Zigler, 1985).

Another reason for the increased interest in marriage is its association with benefits for both men and women (Glenn & Weaver, 1981; Kobrin & Hendershot, 1977; Lauer & Lauer, 1986; Lauer, Lauer, & Kerr, 1990). Marriage is conducive to physical and mental health (Lauer & Lauer, 1986), and death rates are lower for the married compared to the unmarried in all age brackets (Kobrin & Hendershot,

1977). Married people are less likely to have problems with loneliness, and are less likely to commit suicide or be under psychiatric care (Argyle & Henderson, 1985). Finally, marital happiness contributes more than any other factor to a general sense of personal happiness (Glenn & Weaver, 1981; Glenn & Weaver, 1978).

The relationship between marital dysfunction and psychopathology is another reason that marriage has become an important area of study. An association between marital discord and various forms of adult psychopathology, such as alcoholism and depression, has become increasingly clear, although the causal relationship between psychopathology and marital dysfunction remains obscure (Jacobson, 1990). The weight of the evidence suggests that the association between dysfunctional interaction and psychopathology is accounted for by marital distress rather than by the psychiatric disorder itself (Jacobson, 1990).

Still another reason for the interest in marriage is that distressed couples demand help and thereby create a market for therapeutic services. More individuals seek help in mental health clinics for marital problems than for any other single problem. (Jacobson, 1990). Approximately 40% of all clients in mental health clinics indicate that marital problems are part of their difficulty (Yeroff, Kulka, & Douvan, 1981).

The institution of marriage has changed over the past several decades in response to the influences of social phenomena, including economic conditions, the women's movement, employment trends, mobility patterns, mass communication, and the shift in marriage function from a medium of procreation to a source of personal fulfillment (Altrocchi, 1988; Bjorksten & Stewart, 1984; Zube, 1982). These changes have led to more diversity in marital roles (Bjorksten & Stewart, 1984), with roles now more frequently determined through negotiation and problem-solving by each couple as opposed to being dictated by tradition (Zube, 1982). This is particularly true in marriages in which spouses assume multiple marital roles (Zube, 1982). Given these trends, it is believed that there is value in identifying which factors contribute to marital stability.

Marriage can be affected by a large number of causal conditions arising from both inside and outside the relationship (Fitzpatrick, 1987). One element that has consistently been shown to contribute to marital stability is marital satisfaction (Glenn & Weaver, 1981; Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Marital satisfaction refers to spouses' reported level of happiness with their marriage (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Various determinants of marital satisfaction have been examined in the literature, including demographic factors, resources, marital interaction, power, and communication (Kamo, 1986). Research examining marital

satisfaction has found that the way in which a married couple handles conflict is one of the most important determinants of the well-being of their relationship (Gottman, 1990). Since the needs, desires, and ambitions of spouses cannot always be synchronized, some form of conflict is inevitable in marriage (Fitzpatrick, 1988). Several authors have reported that a couple's ability to handle the differences that arise between them discriminates between satisfied and unsatisfied marriages (Fitzpatrick, 1988; Gottman, 1990).

Social scientists have outlined two basic orientations toward handling differences: confrontation and avoidance (Cahn, 1990; Fitzpatrick, 1988; Gottman, 1990; Newton, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Malarkey, 1995; Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain, 1974). Confrontation involves direct expression of feelings, an exploration of the cause of the conflict, clarifying the misunderstanding, and seeking a solution that is satisfying to both partners (Fitzpatrick, 1988). Confronting differences increases the likelihood that disagreements will be resolved, and thus, increases satisfaction (Cahn, 1990).

Avoidance involves the psychological and physical withdrawal from conflict (Fitzpatrick, 1988). It is generally believed by marriage researchers that avoidance is a less effective way of handling disagreements (Cahn, 1990; Gottman, 1990). The implicit assumption is that the

individual who avoids conflict is more constricted, less capable of solving problems, and more likely to be unhappy in a relationship (Cahn, 1990; Newton, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Malarkey, 1995). Habitual avoidance is thought to produce unresolved tensions in a marriage (Levinger, 1979). These tensions are believed to mount and produce dissatisfaction (Baucom, Notarius, Burnett, & Haefner, 1990). Experiments testing modes of conflict resolution in marital dyads do not necessarily lend credence to these assumptions. Raush, Barry, Hertel, & Swain (1974) found that couples who engaged in avoidance were no less satisfied with their marriages than those who confronted differences.

Research has indicated that there are gender differences in the way spouses handle disagreements. The results of several studies have suggested that wives are more likely than husbands to confront disagreements in their marriages (Burke, Weier, & Harrison, 1976; Huston & Ashmore, 1986; Wills, Weiss, & Patterson, 1974). Also, many wives in unhappy marriages complain about their husbands being withdrawn, whereas unhappily married men complain about their wives being too conflict engaging (Fitzpatrick, 1988; Gottman, 1979; Gottman, 1990).

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine whether avoidance of handling differences in marriage predicts being unsatisfied with marriage. This question was explored using

retrospective interview data concerning the childrearing stage of marriage. Sillars and Wilmot (1989) have argued that children provide the impetus for much discussion about parenting. Children could therefore increase any preexisting communication difficulties by giving couples another topic on which to disagree, indirectly contributing to marital dissatisfaction.

Husbands and wives from 60 long-term marriages were interviewed as part of a larger study of marital interaction (see Mackey & O'Brien, 1995). The study sample was relatively diverse in regard to ethnicity/race, level of education, and religious background. In-depth qualitative interviews were used to collect information about the ways these couples solved problems and communicated, and to identify and evaluate the roles, expectations, and needs which they endeavored to fulfill individually and together. A qualitative approach was utilized in order to explore the phenomenology of the marital dyad in a comprehensive manner which is lacking in the existing literature (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987). Husbands and wives were interviewed separately about the influence of these factors over three periods of the family life-cycle. These periods included the pre-child rearing, child rearing, and post-child rearing years. As part of these interviews, subjects were queried in regard to their perceptions of how they and their spouse handled differences during childrearing. They were also

asked about their marital satisfaction during this stage of the family life-cycle. These data were the basis for the present study. Interview data were coded for categories and themes. Logistic regression analysis was employed to examine the association between marital satisfaction and subjects' and spouses' handling of differences.

It was hypothesized that subjects who avoided handling differences in marriage were more likely to be unsatisfied with their marriage than subjects who confronted differences, and that subjects whose spouses avoided handling differences in marriage were more likely to be unsatisfied with their marriage than subjects whose spouses confronted differences. It was also hypothesized that women whose husbands avoided handling differences in marriage were more likely to be unsatisfied with their marriage than men whose wives avoided handling differences.

Strengths and Limitations

The qualitative methodology employed in this study permitted a thorough exploration of marital satisfaction and handling differences which is not possible through strictly quantitative measures, such as rating scales and paper-and-pencil questionnaires. The emphasis of qualitative methodology on obtaining information from the individual's unique perspective was also a strength. The approach provided a way of understanding complex material from each subject's point of view. This study compliments the existing

quantitative research on the relationship between marital satisfaction and handling differences.

There are several methodological limitations of this study. First, there are problems inherent to the use of self-report data. Subjects may be prone to social desirability and inaccurate perceptions (Barry, 1970; Norton, 1983). Spouses were required to recall an earlier stage in their marriage and may have distorted the information or purposely left out important information. Distortions of the data may lead to inaccuracies in the themes which emerge, and thus, to incorrect findings (Belsky, Spanier, & Rovine, 1983; Gray-Little & Burks, 1983). In addition, while the researcher tried to operationally define the questions in the interview, some subjects may have interpreted the questions in unintended ways, thereby offering varied responses based on idiosyncratic interpretations.

The interpretation of self-report data also has limitations. What is interpreted is subjective. To reduce this problem, each interview was coded using a scoring system developed by O'Brien and Mackey (1990). Also, the interviews were coded by both a woman and a man to reduce possible gender bias. Finally, the two researchers coding the interview discussed their independent scoring until a consensus on scoring was reached.

The results of this study are limited in terms of their generalizability for several reasons. First, this is a non-random sample with a limited scope of recruitment. Second, volunteer couples may differ from those who chose not to participate in the study. Third, by virtue of the selection criteria, a fixed age cohort was eligible for the study. Results of this study will be most generalizable to long-term marriages. However, given the relatively large and heterogenous sample, the results of this study should have some applicability to many marriages.

Significance of Study

Fitzpatrick (1988) asserted that the fundamental goals of a science of relationships are to describe, predict and explain. This study attempted to describe the relationship between avoidance of handling differences and marital satisfaction during the childrearing years of marriage. This description may help marital therapists to predict which spouses will be dissatisfied with their relationship during this stage of marriage. Therapists may then be able to intervene to prevent or alleviate this distress. There is a sound theoretical framework of marriage in the literature, and by integrating the results of the proposed study with the marital research literature, theorists may be better able to explain the impact of conflict orientation on marital satisfaction. Finally, this study contributes to a larger ongoing research project investigating the nature of

relationships.

Chapter II

Review of the Literature

This review discusses pertinent research concerning the relationship between couple's handling of differences in a marriage and marital satisfaction. Applicable research examining the influences of children and gender in these areas will also be described. Theoretical foundations are included when presented in the literature. The methodological problems involving this research are also explored.

Marital Satisfaction

Marital satisfaction has been defined in terms of subjective feelings of happiness, satisfaction, and pleasure experienced by a spouse when considering all current aspects of his/her marriage (Belsky, 1990; Fincham & Bradbury, 1988; Fitzpatrick, 1988; Lewis & Spanier, 1979). There are a number of other names for this concept including "marital happiness", "marital quality" and "marital adjustment" (Fitzpatrick, 1988). The subjective nature of marital satisfaction has led to problems generating a clear operational definition of the concept (Barry, 1970; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Kelley & Conley, 1987; Lewis & Spanier, 1979). Barry (1970) suggested that marital satisfaction may be subject to a halo effect of satisfaction with self, job, or other factors external to the marital relationship. Other methodological problems cited in the literature on marital

satisfaction include the absence of a theoretical framework for the concept, a lack of consistent measurement tools, and a deficit of representative samples (Barry, 1970; Hicks & Platt, 1970; Kelley & Conley, 1987).

Marital satisfaction has been the focus of marital research for decades. Research in the 1960s and 1970s emphasized the identification of variables related to marital satisfaction, including demographic factors (e.g., age, education, religion, income), attitude toward spouse, role specifications, sexual enjoyment, emotional expression, companionship, and power (Hicks & Platt, 1970, Spanier & Lewis, 1980). Overall, research in the 1960s suggested a positive relationship between marital happiness and higher occupational status, income and educational level for husbands; similarity of spouses with regard to socioeconomic background, age, and religion; and positive regard for spouse (Hicks & Platt, 1970; Spanier & Lewis, 1980). Also, emotional and physical health, self-concept, and the ability to relate interpersonally were positively correlated with high marital quality. The results of research in the 1970s supported these relationships, with the exception of the relationship between marital satisfaction and socioeconomic variables (Spanier & Lewis, 1980; Lewis & Spanier, 1979).

Lewis and Spanier (1979) argued that marital quality is the key determinant of marital stability. They suggested that marital quality is mediated by a number of "threshold

variables" (Lewis & Spanier, 1979, p. 269), including marital expectations, commitment to marriage and its associated obligations, tolerance for conflict and disharmony, religious doctrine and commitment, external pressure and amenability to social stigma, divorce law and availability of legal aid, and real and perceived alternatives (Lewis & Spanier, 1979).

Lewis and Spanier (1979) advanced three propositions regarding marital quality. First, they noted a positive relationship between available personal and social resources and marital quality. Second, they proposed a positive relationship between lifestyle satisfaction and marital quality. Third, they reported a positive relationship between communication, emotional gratification, and positive regard and marital quality (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). These propositions have been supported by the results of more recent research (Barnes, Schumm, Jurich, & Bollman, 1984; Gottman, 1982; Lauer, Lauer, & Kerr, 1990).

In their study of 100 upper-middle class couples, Lauer, Lauer and Kerr (1990) identified a number of important factors related to marital satisfaction including friendship and involvement in an intimate relationship with someone whose company they enjoyed. In addition, they investigated the couples' level of agreement on themes of finance, leisure activities, religion, display of affection, friendships, philosophy of life, time spent together and

with extended family, sexual relationship, and sociocultural and external variables. The more agreement spouses had with each other in these areas, the more satisfied they were with their marriage. The authors also found that husbands and wives were strikingly similar in their responses. O'Leary and Turkewitz (1981) found a high correlation between love and positive feelings and marital satisfaction in a group of middle-class couples in marital therapy. Other studies have also cited love as the most important affective factor for marital satisfaction (Broderick, 1981; Broderick & O'Leary, 1986).

In a review, Noller (1984) cited a number of studies which attest to the importance of communication to marital satisfaction. Communication behaviors associated with increased marital satisfaction include self-disclosure, sensitivity to other's feelings, listening and responding, confirmation, and expressing respect and esteem. Communication behaviors that were related to decreased marital satisfaction include lack of communication, responsiveness, and listening, as well as criticism, arguing, and nagging. In a longitudinal study of nine well-educated, middle-class couples, Markman (1981) found that the better the communication, the more satisfied the couple. Moore (1980), in a survey of 244 primarily blue-collar couples married a minimum of 20 years, found that negative patterns of communication were more common in the

interactions of unhappily married couples than in happily married couples.

Several research groups have suggested that rewards from marital interaction can make a marriage more satisfying. These rewards include spousal warmth (Lorenz, Conger, Simon, Whitbeck, & Elder, 1991), feeling understood by a spouse (Allen & Thompson, 1984), perceived degree of companionship (Berry & Williams, 1987), and sense of fairness in a marriage (Kamo, 1993).

Gender

In their review of gender differences, Baucom, Notarius, Burnett, and Haefner (1990) reported that, in general, women were less satisfied with marriage than men. Similarly, Gove and Zeiss (1987) reported that being married was more strongly related to overall happiness for men than for women. On the other hand, the authors found that the quality of the marital relationship was more important for women than for men. Specifically, how close a woman felt to her spouse was a strong predictor of her overall happiness.

Wills, Weiss, and Patterson (1974) asked individuals in their sample of seven middle-class couples to observe the instrumental and affectional behaviors of their spouses for two weeks and to rate their interactions in terms of pleasantness. The researchers examined the correlation of instrumental (necessary for day to day living) and affectional (serving to maintain the relationship) behaviors

to ratings of pleasurable interactions. Their findings indicated that satisfaction is increased by behaviors that do not fit societal expectations in terms of sex role. Couples in which husbands were more affectional and wives more instrumental than expected expressed greater satisfaction with their marriages.

Children

The impact of children on marital satisfaction has attracted more comment and research than any other single issue in the family life-span literature (Sillars & Wilmot, 1989). In a review of the literature in this area, Belsky (1990) reported that cross-sectional research indicates that marital satisfaction declines with the arrival of a first child and continues in that direction or levels off until children leave the home, at which time it increases. The results of other cross-sectional studies have also suggested that marital satisfaction declines over the first 15 years of marriage, a period which parallels the parenting years, and then increases after the children leave home (Hicks & Platt, 1970; Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Moore, 1980; Orden & Bradburn, 1969; Spanier, Lewis, & Cole, 1975).

Belsky (1990) also reported that short-term longitudinal research suggests that marital satisfaction declines across the transition to parenthood. O'Neil, Fishman, and Kinsella-Shaw (1987) reviewed the literature on marital satisfaction through the family life-cycle and found

a curvilinear relationship between marital satisfaction and stage of life. The authors found that marital satisfaction was high for young couples, decreased after the birth of the first child, continued to decrease through child-rearing, and then increased when child-rearing ended. O'Brien and Mackey (O'Brien & Mackey, 1994; Mackey & O'Brien, 1995) described a similar relationship between marital satisfaction and stage of life in their study of a diverse sample of 60 couples married at least 20 years. However, Spanier, Lewis, and Cole's (1975) study of 1574 couples provided only partial support of the curvilinear relationship between satisfaction and stage of life.

Jacobson (1990) posited that reduced spousal companionship, disagreements over childrearing, the traditionalizing effect of children on the household division of labor, and the adverse effects of children on psychological well-being most likely mediate the marital changes associated with children. Lewis (1988a; 1988b) noted that the transition to parenthood is a developmental challenge for couples. They must adapt to changes both in role and in their interpersonal relationship. The decline in marital satisfaction when children are born has been associated with a decrease in romance and an increase in instrumental aspects of the relationship (Lewis, 1988b).

Cowan, Cowan, Heming, Garrett, Coysh, Curtis-Boyles, & Boles (1985) studied a large sample of new middle-class

parents and the stresses and changes they experienced as compared with non-parents. They cited more negative changes in couples with first children than in couples with no children; they also found an increase in spousal differentiation as couples became parents. In this same study, couples with children took on more gender-specific roles: men became more work focused while women became more focused on domestic responsibilities. Women reported that their husbands pulled away from the family when they were needed more. These shifts in roles were associated with declines in marital satisfaction for both individuals.

Belsky (1990) suggested that the decline in marital satisfaction that takes place during the transition to parenthood may reflect an acceleration and accentuation of normative changes that take place over time in marriage. The author asserts that the transition usually occurs during the early years of marriage when marital quality is likely to decline whether the couple has a child or not (Belsky, 1990). McHale and Huston (1985) gathered data on 168 middle-class couples two months after their weddings and again a year later. Both couples who did and did not have a child experienced a decline in marital satisfaction, the degree of change being about the same for the two groups. However, those who had a child experienced changes in companionship and marital role that the nonparents did not experience.

Handling Differences

Conflict is inevitable in close relationships such as marriage (Bernard, 1974; Fitzpatrick, 1988; Kelley, 1970; Rands, Levinger, Mellinger, 1981; Waller, 1938). The ability of husbands and wives to handle the conflicts that arise in marriage distinguishes between distressed and nondistressed marriages (Fitzpatrick, 1988; Gottman, 1990; Levinger, 1979).

Rands, Levinger, and Mellinger (1981) asserted that marital conflict can be constructive if it extends the bounds of partners' previous interaction, promotes the better understanding of each other's positions, and, when possible, leads to resolution of their conflicting interests. Conflict becomes destructive if it threatens the basis of the relationship or escalates beyond the original problem (Rands, Levinger, & Mellinger, 1981). The authors argued that conflict cannot be resolved unless it is openly expressed, and that conflict avoidance permits negative feelings to accumulate.

Confrontation involves the direct expression of feelings, an examination of the conflict's cause, clarification of the disagreement, and the pursuit of a solution acceptable to both partners (Fitzpatrick, 1988). Confronting differences increases the likelihood that disagreements will be resolved, and thus increases satisfaction (Cahn, 1990).

Optimally, couples manage their conflicting interests with some form of negotiation or problem-solving strategy. The ideal scenario involves a spouse stating a position, seeking and obtaining validation from their partner, and engaging in a straightforward problem-solving exchange. In this scenario, both spouses work toward resolution until a mutually acceptable solution is achieved (Fitzpatrick, 1988).

Cahn (1990) proposed three reasons why confronting differences is beneficial for intimate relationships. First, confrontation is viewed more positively by spouses than avoidance. Cahn reported that conflict engaging behaviors are viewed as more competent than avoidance tactics. Second, confronting differences may increase male-female intimacy. Verbal disagreements produce increased understanding of other's perspectives (Knudson, Sommers, & Golding, 1980). Third, over the long run, conflict engaging behaviors reduce stress because they frequently do lead to problem resolution.

Fitzpatrick (1988) described two confrontation strategies: problem-solving and contending. Problem-solving is a cooperative strategy in which an alternative that satisfies aspirations on both sides is sought. Problem-solving is accomplished with messages implying cooperation, validation or contracting. Emphasizing communalities, initiating problem-solving and accepting responsibility are

examples of cooperative communication acts (Fitzpatrick, 1988).

Contending involves one spouse trying to impose a preferred solution on their partner (Fitzpatrick, 1988). This strategy includes communicative acts which find fault with, or blame, the partner. Compliance-gaining is a form of contending in which a spouse uses a repertoire of subtle persuasive tactics in order to achieve their own goals (Fitzpatrick, 1988).

Sillars (1980) defined conflict avoidance as the psychological withdrawal from conflict accomplished by a number of communicative acts designed to move the discussion away from the matter at hand. Examples of avoidance strategies he noted included speaking abstractly about an issue, denying that a problem exists, and making jokes. In addition, he reported that spouses could retreat from a conflict by yielding, which involves spouses lowering their aspirations and settling for less than they would have liked.

The dominant view among marital theorists is that avoiding conflict in marriage is detrimental to the relationship. (Cahn, 1990; Christensen & Pasch, 1993; Gottman, 1990). Duck (1988) asserted that unresolved conflicts leave couples unhappy, doubting, and irritated. Rusbult, Johnson, and Morrow (1986) proposed that avoiding conflict in a relationship predicts couple distress. Bochner

(1983) asserted that within the dominant vision of intimacy in which relationships are devoted to psychological closeness and emotional growth, avoidance is construed as an antisocial strategy because it precludes dealing directly with conflict and its ramifications.

It is generally believed by marriage researchers that avoidance is a less effective way of handling disagreements (Cahn, 1990; Gottman, 1990). The implicit assumption is that the individual who avoids conflict is more constricted, less capable of solving problems, and more likely to be unhappy in a relationship (Cahn, 1990; Newton, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Malarkey, 1995). Habitual avoidance is thought to produce unresolved tensions in a marriage (Levinger, 1979). These tensions are believed to mount and produce dissatisfaction (Baucom, Notarius, Burnett, & Haefner, 1990).

Fitzpatrick (1988) noted that avoiding conflict in marriage does not always have a negative consequence for the relationship. The author asserted that couples should postpone or avoid the discussion of serious conflicts until they have the time or energy to handle them. Fitzpatrick posited that long-term avoidance of conflict, not just short-term, may be functional in certain couples. She pointed out that when an issue is unresolvable, functional approaches to communication suggest that the issue should be avoided and the discussion channeled into more agreeable topics (Fitzpatrick, 1988).

Raush, Barry, Hertel, and Swain (1974) reported considerable conflict avoidance in their observational study of 48 white, middle-class, newlywed couples thrust into conflict situations. However, they noted that couples who avoided conflict with one another were no less comfortable with their marriage than couples who did not. Avoiding discussion of conflictual issues does not, then, always appear to have a negative consequence for a marriage.

In general, however, research has been supportive of the hypothesis that avoidance is negatively associated with marital satisfaction. White (1983) collected survey data from 2034 recently married, white predominantly white-collar men and women and found a significant relationship between marital interaction and marital happiness. White found that the most important determinant of marital interaction was effectiveness of communication which was defined, in part, as the lack of avoidance.

Rands, Mellinger, and Levinger (1981) collected survey data from 244 white, predominantly middle-class couples in their first decade of marriage, who responded to questions about conflict in their relationship. In general, they found that both husbands and wives who perceived their spouse as avoiding conflict were less satisfied with their marriage than those who perceived their spouse as confronting conflict.

Noller and White (1990), using data from a communication questionnaire administered to 22 predominantly white-collar couples, found that couples low in satisfaction rated avoidance as a more likely behavior than couples higher in satisfaction. Using the same questionnaire, Christensen and Shenk (1991) found that distressed couples rated avoidance as a more likely behavior than nondistressed couples. Similarly, in a survey study of 239 predominantly white-collar couples between the ages of 30 and 45, Schaap, Buunk, and Kerkstra (1988) found that spouse avoidance predicted marital dissatisfaction.

Sayers, Baucom, Sher, Weiss, and Heyman (1991) observed the communication behavior of 60 white, predominantly middle-class couples who were married an average of about eight years and had participated in a behavioral marital therapy outcome study. They found that improvements in marital satisfaction were associated with a decrease in avoidance behavior. This result was particularly true for husbands compared to wives.

Krokoff, Gottman, and Roy (1988) observed 52 blue-collar and white-collar couples during a problem-solving interaction to assess the effects of marital happiness, occupational status, and communication orientation on the frequency of negative affect and negative affect reciprocity. The authors found that avoidance of conflict was positively related to negative affect displayed during

the structured interaction, and that negative affect was negatively correlated with marital happiness.

Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, and Callan (1994) assessed the communication and relationship satisfaction of 33 predominantly middle-class couples prior to marriage and twice during the first two years of marriage. They found that spouses high in relationship satisfaction after two years were less likely to avoid dealing with conflict. This was particularly true for wives compared to husbands.

Evidence of the relationship between avoidance and marital satisfaction has also come from longitudinal studies. Smith, Vivian, and O'Leary (1991) conducted a study of 91 predominantly white-collar couples assessed prior to marriage and at 18 and 30 months after marriage. They found that disengagement in problem-solving discussions prior to marriage was associated with marital satisfaction at 18 and 30 months following marriage.

Gottman and Krokoff (1989) performed two longitudinal studies with 25 predominantly blue-collar couples who were observed during an attempt to resolve a high-conflict issue. They found that withdrawal from interaction during the attempted resolution predicted deterioration in marital satisfaction three years later.

Gender

The results of several studies have indicated that wives are more likely than husbands to confront differences

in their marriage (Burke, Weier, & Harrison, 1976; Christenson & Shenk, 1991; Huston & Ashmore, 1986; Mackey & O'Brien, 1995; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Weiss, Hops, & Patterson, 1973; Wills, Weiss, & Patterson, 1974). Gottman (1990) described a pattern in the marital literature in which wives in unhappy marriages are described as conflict engaging, whereas husbands are described as withdrawn. The author reported that the results of his own research suggested that unhappily married women complain about their husbands being withdrawn, whereas unhappily married men complain about their wives being conflict engaging (Gottman, 1990).

One of the earliest studies of marriage found that dissatisfied wives complained of their husbands' withdrawal whereas dissatisfied husbands complained of their wives' criticisms, complaints, and emotionality (Terman, Bittenweiser, Ferguson, Johnson, & Wilson, 1938). Rubin (1976) described the withdrawal of husbands as common in her sociological study of 50 white, working class families. Her results suggested that these unhappily married husbands may have withdrawn from intense negative affect. Similarly, Komarovsky (1962) reported that a greater proportion of husbands than wives in her sample of 58 white, blue-collar marriages withdrew, either physically or psychologically, from conflict. She noted that 43% of the husbands, but only 24% of the wives in her qualitative study exhibited some

type of withdrawal as a response to conflict (Komarovsky, 1962).

Gottman and Krokoff (1989) reported that in unhappy marriages, wives are described as conflict-engaging, whereas husbands are described as withdrawn. Roberts and Krokoff (1990), in a longitudinal study of 22 middle-class couples, found that husbands' withdrawal from a high-conflict interaction predicted wives' marital satisfaction.

Christensen and Heavey (1990) conducted a study of 31 predominantly white, middle-class, married couples observed during a discussion on parenting. Data revealed that fathers withdrew from the discussion more often than mothers. They also found that fathers' withdrawal was significantly correlated with mothers' marital satisfaction.

Heavey, Layne, and Christensen (1993) conducted a study of 29 middle-class married couples who were observed during discussions in which they requested changes in their spouses' behavior. Interactions in which a husband engaged and his wife withdrew predicted an increase in her satisfaction one year later, whereas interactions in which a wife engaged and her husband withdrew predicted a decline in her satisfaction. Heavey, Christensen, and Malamuth (1995) completed a longitudinal study of 48 predominantly white-collar couples observed during a problem-solving interaction and then two-and-a-half years later. Withdrawal from the interaction was associated with both concurrent and later

satisfaction for both women and men. However, problem-solving interactions in which the man withdrew and the woman engaged predicted a decline in her relationship satisfaction two-and-a-half years later.

Gottman (1990) proposed that wives manage marital disagreements for the sake of long term improvements in marital satisfaction. The author suggested that a wife's introduction and elaboration on a disagreement may get her husband to confront the area of conflict. Gottman posited that this may be beneficial to the longitudinal course of relationship satisfaction if the interaction does not result in the husband whining, being stubborn, or withdrawing. He also noted that these negative types of interaction patterns are more deleterious to the relationship if they are characteristic of husbands as opposed to wives.

However, not all studies have indicated a gender linkage in avoidance. Burggraff and Sillars (1987) observed the conflict resolution strategies of 76 white-collar married couples and found that husbands and wives did not differ in their use of avoidance or confrontational tactics. Unlike most other studies in this area, however, observation of the couples took place in their homes rather than a laboratory. Similarly, Roberts and Krokoff (1990) observed 22 blue-collar married couples, half of whom reported they were satisfied with their marriage and half whom reported they were dissatisfied, while they were attempting to

resolve a marital problem and did not find any gender differences in withdrawal from conflict.

In general, however, research has supported the observation that women tend to engage conflict while men tend to withdraw from it. Some theorists have adopted an individual differences perspective to explain this trend. They argue that the pattern results from the different personality characteristics of men and women, which are a result of socialization influences and physiological factors (Baucom, Notarius, Burnett, & Haefner, 1990; Heavey, Layne, & Christenson, 1993; Gottman, 1990; O'Leary & Smith, 1991; Lewis, 1988). Heavey, Layne, and Christensen (1993) posited that through sex-role conditioning, women are trained to be affiliative and expressive and thus more likely to fear rejection and abandonment in relationships, whereas men are trained to be strong and independent and thus more likely to fear intrusion and engulfment in relationships. Gilligan (1982) and Rubin (1983) provide theoretical elaboration on the nature of gender socialization and its effects on adult intimate relationships. These authors propose that women's identities are developed within the context of a relationship, while men's identities are developed within the context of separation. Because of these different developmental experiences, women are more commonly threatened by separation and men by intimacy in adult relationships (Gilligan, 1982; Rubin, 1983).

Christensen (1988) argued that socialization differences between women and men generate a core conflict concerning intimacy in marriage: wives are more likely to want closeness, whereas husbands are more likely to want autonomy. Christensen suggested that this conflict leads to women wanting greater intimacy in marriage and pressing for it by complaints and demands and men wanting greater autonomy and pursuing it by withdrawal. As evidence for his position, Christensen (1987) gathered questionnaire data from 142 married couples and couples living together. The results suggested that couples who had a conflict about closeness/autonomy had higher levels of demand/withdraw interaction, and that individuals who wanted more closeness tended to be demanders, whereas those who wanted more autonomy tended to be withdrawers. The author also found that women tended to want more closeness and to be demanders, whereas men tended to want more autonomy and to be withdrawers (Christenson, 1987).

Gottman and Levenson (1988) implicated differences in physiological stress reactivity, rather than socialization, as the cause of gender differences in conflict behavior. The authors summarized evidence showing that men are more physiologically reactive to stressful stimuli than women. They argued that men's avoidance of conflict, withdrawal from conflict, and attempts to reconcile conflict result from their greater arousal from conflict. Gottman and

Levenson suggested that because women are less reactive to stress and can function more effectively in a climate of negative affect, they are more likely to escalate conflict.

Jacobson (1983) advanced a social-structural explanation for the observed gender differences in conflict behavior. The author asserted that men are the primary beneficiaries of traditional marital relationship structures, and summarized research indicating that women carry the burden of household and child care responsibilities even when both spouses are employed full time. Given this situation, Jacobson suggested that men are more likely to be the conservative force in marriage, with a vested interest in preserving the status quo, whereas women are more likely to initiate change. He argued that women are dissatisfied with the status quo and thus pressure for change, while men are more satisfied with the status quo and thus withdraw and avoid confrontation that might force them to change.

The results of Christenson and Heavey's (1990) study provided partial support for Jacobson's (1983) assertions. The authors observed 31 blue-collar and white-collar married couples in two conflict situations, one in which the husband wanted a change in his wife and one in which the wife wanted a change in her husband. The data indicated that both husbands and wives were more likely to be demanding when discussing a change they wanted in their partner and more

likely to be withdrawing when discussing a change their spouse wanted. However, men were more withdrawn than women overall, but women were not more demanding than men overall.

Children

Sillars and Wilmot (1989) posited that children provide the impetus for much instrumental discussion of parenting issues, but that quality of communication declines through the early stages of childrearing because of constraints on time and energy. The authors also suggested that children complicate decision-making, raise the emotional level of interactions, and increase geometrically the number of conflicts that arise among married couples. Cowan, Cowan, Heming, Garrett, Cysh, Curtis-Boles, and Boles (1985), in a short-term longitudinal study of predominantly white-collar couples, discovered that the occurrence of conflict increases for those experiencing the transition to parenthood. The results of several longitudinal studies have indicated that there is a decrease in both the frequency and quality of marital interactions during the childrearing years (Enfer, 1988). Steinberg (1987) argued that there is a particular increase in negative interaction between spouses when children are adolescents. Belsky (1990), in a review of the literature on children and marriage, posited that conflict between spouses increases and marital satisfaction decreases during the childrearing years because couples spend less time together as a couple, communicate less, and

focus more of their interactions on the children than on their relationship.

Summary

The cited literature suggests that marital satisfaction is a key determinant of marital stability and that, in general, women are less satisfied with marriage than men. Also, marital satisfaction tends to decrease during the parenting years of the family life-cycle. The literature reviewed also indicates that avoidance of problem-solving is associated with marital dissatisfaction. A pattern of marital interaction in which one spouse attempts to engage in a problem-solving discussion, while the other spouse avoids the discussion is also associated with dissatisfaction. This is particularly true when wives attempt to confront and husbands avoid. Finally, the presence of children is assumed to increase the number of conflicts in married couples.

Chapter III

Research Design and Statistical Methods

Sample

Data from 120 spouses (60 couples) who participated in a larger study of marital functioning (see Mackey & O'Brien, 1995, for details) were used for this study. Couples in the study met the following criteria: (a) Married for at least 20 years; (b) at least one child; (c) youngest child at least 18 years and/or out of high school; (d) no history of extensive marriage counseling or individual psychotherapy. Couples were recruited through trade unions, business and professional organizations, churches and synagogues, and other community organizations. No specific incentives were offered in order to secure subjects for the study.

The sample was chosen to fit the goal of developing an understanding of marriage and is relatively diverse in regard to ethnicity/race (57% white; 23% African-American; 20% Mexican-American), religious background (42% Catholic; 33% Protestant; 20% Jewish), and education (35% college graduate; 65% noncollege graduate). In regard to age, 16% of those interviewed were in their 40s, 20% in their 70s, and 54% in their 50s and 60s. The average age was 58 for men and 56 for women, with a range from 44 to 78. In regard to length of marriage, 27% of the couples had been married for more than 40 years, 42% between 30 and 40 years, and 32% less than 30 years. The average length of marriage was 29.5

years, with a range from 25 to 52 years. In regard to number of children, 35% had one or two children, 47% had three or four, and 18% had five or more. By family income, about 12% earned less than \$25,000, 32% between \$25,000 and \$49,999, 25% between 50,000 and 74,999, 12% between \$75,000 and \$99,999, and 19% more than \$100,000. Most couples resided in the northeast part of the country with the exception of the Mexican-Americans who lived in the southwest.

Data Collection

Data obtained from interviews using a semi-structured protocol, designed by Mackey and O'Brien (1996), was used for this study. The stated goal of the interview was to acquire in-depth information about intergenerational, interpersonal, gender, ethnic, economic, and communication factors in long-term marriages (Mackey & O'Brien, 1996). Interviewees were asked about their roles, needs, expectations, sense of relatedness to each other, conflicts, style of handling differences, and marriage fairness and satisfaction as their marriage evolved. Subjects were encouraged to express the meanings and processes of their marital interactions within their own frame of reference. Interviewees were asked to think and talk about their marriage along three stages. The first stage spanned between marriage and the birth of the first child. The second stage began with the birth of their first child and ended when their last child turned 18 or graduated from high school.

The third stage began when their last child turned 18 or graduated from high school and continued up until the time of the interview.

An interview guide developed by Mackey and O'Brien (1996) was used by the interviewers. The four page guide divided the interview into four major sections: relationship; social influences (including social, economic, and cultural factors); parents' marriage; and experiences and views of the marriage over the three marital life-cycle stages.

The interviewers, advanced doctoral students with considerable clinical experience, were extensively trained by Richard Mackey, Ph.D., and Bernard O'Brien, Ph.D., authors of the interview protocol and scoring system. All interviewers were women. Interviews were held in the homes of subjects, and each subject was interviewed separately. Prior to the interview, subjects were told the purpose of the study, given an overview of the interview schedule, and were assured that their identities would remain anonymous. Informed consent was then obtained. An open-ended style of interviewing was used, supplemented by focal questions. The length of the interview was approximately two hours.

Coding the Data

A scoring system was developed to identify themes that evolved from each section of the interview (Mackey & O'Brien, 1996). There were over 90 categories in 24 topic

areas. Rating scores were obtained for each category in each of the three stages of marriage. There were 121 separate scored items for each interview.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim from tape recordings in preparation for coding. Each interview was coded independently by two raters, a man and a woman, who noted categories and themes as they emerged from the transcripts. The male coder, Bernard O'Brien, Ph.D., is an experienced family therapist and co-author of the interview protocol and scoring system. The female coder was the interviewer. Raters met together to compare their independent codes. When discrepancies occurred, the raters discussed the differences until a consensus was reached as to how a particular item should be scored (Mackey & O'Brien, 1996).

Inter-rater Agreement

Inter-rater agreement was computed using all 121 items from each of the 120 interviews. The agreement between raters, determined by dividing the number of agreements by total number of scores, was 87%.

Variables of Interest

Marital Satisfaction

As part of the marriage interview, subjects were asked, "How satisfied were you with your marriage?" Subjects who stated they were satisfied with their marriage were coded as Satisfied (0). Subjects who reported dissatisfaction with

their marriage were coded as Unsatisfied. Subjects who expressed ambivalence about the quality of their marriage were coded as Mixed. The values Unsatisfied and Mixed were later collapsed into a single category, Unsatisfied (1), to meet the requirements of statistical analyses.

Subject's Handling of Differences

Subjects were asked, "How did you handle differences in your marriage?". If the subject described any efforts to deny or escape face-to-face discussion, their style of handling differences was coded as Avoid (1). If the subject reported efforts to express his/her thoughts and feelings directly to his/her spouse in a face-to-face encounter, their style of handling differences was coded as Confront (0). Responses that included both styles of behavior were coded according to the predominant style described in the response.

Spouse's Handling of Differences

Subjects were also asked, "How does your spouse handle differences in your marriage?". Parallel to the scoring on the previous variable, if the subject described spouse behavior that included efforts to deny or escape face-to-face discussion, the spouse's style of handling differences was coded as Avoid (1). If the subject reported spouse behavior that included efforts to express his/her thoughts and feelings directly to his/her spouse in a face to face encounter, the spouse's style of handling differences was

coded as Confront (0). Responses that included both styles of behavior were coded according to the predominant style described in the response.

Gender

Gender was coded as Men (0) and Women (1).

Treatment of the Data

The coded interviews yielded nominal and ordinal level data, requiring the use of nonparametric procedures (Glass & Hopkins, 1984). Logistic regression analysis, a nonparametric multivariate statistic was employed in this study.

Logistic Regression Analysis

Logistic regression analysis relates one or more predictor variables to a dependent variable (Menard, 1995). Logistic regression was an appropriate statistical test for this study because the dependent variables were dichotomous, the outcomes were statistically independent, and the categories under analysis are mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive (Menard, 1995).

The Logistic Regression Model

In logistic regression, a direct estimate of the probability of an event occurring is computed. For the case of a single independent variable, the logistic regression model can be written as

$$\text{Prob (event)} = \frac{e^{B_0+B_jX}}{1 + e^{B_0+B_jX}}$$

or equivalently,

$$\text{Prob (event)} = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(B_0 + B_1 X)}}$$

where B_0 and B_1 are coefficients estimated from the data, X is the independent variable, and e is the base of the natural logarithms (approximately 2.718).

For more than one independent variable, the model can be written as

$$\text{Prob (event)} = \frac{e^z}{1 + e^z}$$

or equivalently,

$$\text{Prob (event)} = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-z}}$$

where Z is the linear combination

$$Z = B_0 + B_1 X_1 + B_2 X_2 + \dots + B_p X_p$$

The probability of the event not occurring is estimated as

$$\text{Prob (no event)} = 1 - \text{Prob (event)}$$

The logistic curve is sigmoidal, and closely resembles the curve obtained when the cumulative probability of the normal distribution is plotted (Norusis, 1990). The relationship between the independent variable and the probability is nonlinear. The probability estimates will always be between 0 and 1, regardless of the value of Z . In

general, if the estimated probability of an event occurring is less than 0.5, it is predicted that the event will not occur. Conversely, if the estimated probability of an event occurring is greater than 0.5, it is predicted that the event will occur (Wright, 1995).

In logistic regression, the parameters of the model are estimated using the maximum-likelihood method. That is, the coefficients that make the observed results most likely are selected (Norusis, 1990). Since the logistic regression model is nonlinear, an iterative algorithm is necessary for parameter estimation (Norusis, 1990).

The model chi-square statistic, which has a chi-square distribution, can be used to assess the overall goodness of fit of a logistic regression model (Menard, 1995; Norusis, 1990). A z-test can be used to determine the significance of individual predictor coefficients (Wright, 1995).

Logistic regression analysis was used to predict the probability of being unsatisfied with marriage - a level of the dependent variable marital satisfaction - from the values of the predictor variables - subject's and spouse's handling of differences, and gender. An alpha level of 0.05 was be used for all tests.

Research Hypotheses

1. Subject's handling of differences predicts marital satisfaction and individuals who reported avoiding handling differences in marriage are more likely to have reported

being unsatisfied with the marriage than individuals who reported confronting differences.

2. Spouse's handling of differences predicts marital satisfaction and individuals who reported that their spouses avoided handling differences in their marriage are more likely to have reported being unsatisfied with the marriage than individuals who reported that their spouses confronted differences.

3. Spouse's handling of differences and gender, together, predict marital satisfaction and wives who reported that their husbands avoided handling differences in their marriage are more likely to have reported being unsatisfied with the marriage than husbands who reported that their wives avoided handling differences.

4. Subject's handling of differences, spouse's handling of differences, and gender, together, predict marital satisfaction, and wives who reported that they confronted differences in their marriage and that their husbands avoided handling differences in the marriage are more likely to have reported being unsatisfied with the marriage than husbands who reported that they confronted differences in their marriage and that their wives avoided handling differences.

Chapter IV

Results

General Results

Of the 120 husbands and wives in the study (60 men; 60 women), 74 (61.7%) reported being satisfied, and 46 (38.3%) unsatisfied with their marriage. Fifty-nine (49.2%) individuals reported avoiding handling differences in their marriage and 61 (50.8%) reported confronting differences. Fifty-six (46.7%) individuals perceived their spouse as avoiding handling differences in their marriages and 64 (53.3%) saw their spouse as confronting differences.

Subject's Handling of Difference and Marital Satisfaction

To determine if subject's handling of differences in marriage predicted marital satisfaction, a logistic regression analysis was performed. The analysis employed the predictor variables Subject's Handling of Differences and the dependent variable Marital Satisfaction. As can be seen in Table 1, the model chi-square statistic for this multivariate model is 0.802, with 1 degree of freedom. The probability associated with this statistic is .3750. Because the probability is greater than alpha .05, it cannot be concluded that subject's handling of differences predicts marital satisfaction. This univariate model correctly classified 61.67% of the 120 cases. Predicted probabilities could not be computed as there was not a significant relationship between subject's handling of differences and

marital satisfaction.

Table 1

Logistic Regression Values for Subject's Handling of Differences on Satisfaction

<u>Variable</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>z</u>	<u>p</u>
SUBHANDIF	0.34	0.38	0.89	.372
Constant	-0.64	0.27	2.39	.017
Model $X^2 = 0.802$ 1df p = .3750				

Spouse's Handling of Difference and Marital Satisfaction

A logistic regression analysis was used to determine if spouse's handling of differences in marriage predicted marital satisfaction. The analysis employed the predictor variable Spouse's Handling of Differences and the dependent variable Marital Satisfaction. As shown in Table 2, the model chi-square statistic for this multivariate model is 8.106, with 1 degree of freedom. The probability associated with this statistic is .0044. It can be concluded that spouse's handling of differences predicted marital satisfaction as the probability is less than alpha .05. This univariate model correctly classified 63.33% of the 120 cases.

Table 2

Logistic Regression Values for Spouse's Handling of Differences on Satisfaction

<u>Variable</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>z</u>	<u>p</u>
SPOHANDIF	1.09	0.39	2.79	.005
Constant	-1.02	0.28	3.64	.000
Model $X^2 = 8.106$ 1df p = .0044				

Predicted probabilities of being unsatisfied with marriage were computed for all combinations of the predictor variable. These results are presented in Table 3. For an individual who reported that their spouse confronted differences, the predicted probability of reporting having been unsatisfied is .27. For an individual who reported that their spouse avoided handling differences, the predicted probability of reporting having been unsatisfied is .52.

Table 3

Predicted Probabilities of being Unsatisfied for Spouse's Handling of Differences

Avoid	.52
Confront	.27

Spouse's Handling of Differences, Gender and Marital
Satisfaction

Prior to determining if spouse's handling of differences and gender, together, predict marital satisfaction, a logistic regression analysis was employed to ascertain if gender predicted marital satisfaction independently. The analysis employed the predictor variable Gender and the dependent variable Marital Satisfaction. As presented in Table 4, the model chi-square statistic for this multivariate model is 6.994, with 1 degree of freedom. The probability associated with this statistic is .0082. Because the probability is less than alpha .05, it can be concluded that gender predicts marital satisfaction. This univariate model correctly classified 61.67% of the 120 cases.

Table 4

Logistic Regression Values for Gender on Satisfaction

<u>Variable</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>z</u>	<u>p</u>
GENDER	1.02	0.39	2.60	.009
Constant	-1.02	0.29	3.47	.000
Model $X^2 = 6.994$ 1df p = .0082				

Predicted probabilities of being unsatisfied with marriage were computed for all combinations of the predictor variable. These results are shown in Table 5. For a husband,

the predicted probability of reporting having been unsatisfied is .36. For a wife, the predicted probability of reporting having been unsatisfied is .52.

Table 5

Predicted Probabilities of being Unsatisfied for Gender

Women	.52
Men	.36

A logistic regression analysis was used to determine if spouse's handling of differences and gender, together, predicted marital satisfaction. The analysis employed the predictor variables Spouse's Handling of Differences and Gender, and the dependent variable Marital Satisfaction. As shown in Table 6, the model chi-square statistic for this multivariate model is 9.943, with 2 degrees of freedom. The probability associated with this statistic is .0069. Because the probability is less than alpha .05, it can be concluded that subject's handling of differences and gender, together, predicted marital satisfaction. This multivariate model correctly classified 68.33% of the 120 cases, indicating that a model containing the variables Spouse's Handling of Differences and Gender better predicts marital satisfaction than a model containing either of these variables alone.

Table 6

Logistic Regression Values for Spouse's Handling of Differences and Gender on Satisfaction

<u>Variable</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>z</u>	<u>p</u>
SPOHANDIF	0.77	0.45	1.71	.087
GENDER	0.62	0.45	1.36	.175
Constant	-1.19	0.32	14.10	.001
Model $X^2 = 9.943$		2df	p = .0069	

Predicted probabilities of being unsatisfied with marriage were computed for all combinations of the predictor variables. The results are presented in Table 7. For a husband who reported that his wife confronted differences, the predicted probability of reporting having been unsatisfied is .23. For a wife who reported that her husband confronted differences, the predicted probability of reporting having been unsatisfied is .36. For a husband who reported that his wife avoided handling differences, the predicted probability of reporting having been unsatisfied is .40. For a wife who reported that her husband avoided handling differences, the predicted probability of reporting having been unsatisfied is .55.

Table 7

Predicted Probabilities of being Unsatisfied for Spouse's Handling of Differences and Gender

SPOHANDIF	<u>Avoid</u>	<u>Confront</u>
Men	.40	.23
Women	.55	.36

Subject's and Spouse's Handling of Differences, Gender, and Marital Satisfaction

To determine if subject's and spouse's handling of differences, and gender, together, predicted marital satisfaction, a logistic regression analysis was performed. This analysis employed the predictor variables Subject's Handling of Differences, Spouse's Handling of Differences, and Gender, and the dependent variable Marital Satisfaction. As can be seen in Table 8, the model chi-square for this multivariate model is 12.947, with 3 degrees of freedom. The probability associated with this statistic is .0048. It can be concluded that subject's and spouse's handling of differences, and gender, together, predicted marital satisfaction because the probability is less than .05. This multivariate model correctly classified 65.83% of the 120 cases, indicating that a model containing the variables Spouse's Handling of Differences and Gender better predicts marital satisfaction than a model containing the variables Subject's Handling of Differences, Spouse's Handling of

Differences, and Gender.

Table 8

Logistic Regression Values for Subject's and Spouse's
Handling of Differences, and Gender on Satisfaction

<u>Variable</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>SE</u>	<u>z</u>	<u>p</u>
SUBHANDIF	0.74	0.44	1.69	.089
SPOHANDIF	0.70	0.46	1.53	.127
GENDER	0.92	0.50	1.84	.067
Constant	-1.68	0.44	3.82	.000
Model $X^2 = 12.947$		3df	p = .0048	

Predicted probabilities of being unsatisfied with marriage were computed for all combinations of the predictor variables. These results are presented in Table 9. For a husband who reported that he confronted differences and that his wife confronted differences, the predicted probability of reporting having been unsatisfied is .16. For a husband who reported that he confronted differences and that his wife avoided handling differences, the predicted probability of reporting having been unsatisfied is .27. For a husband who reported that he avoided handling differences and that his wife confronted differences, the predicted probability of reporting having been unsatisfied is .28. For a husband who reported that he avoided handling differences and that his wife avoided handling differences, the predicted

probability of reporting having been unsatisfied is .44.

For a wife who reported that she confronted differences and that her husband confronted differences, the predicted probability of reporting having been unsatisfied is .32. For a wife who reported that she confronted differences and that her husband avoided handling differences, the predicted probability of reporting having been unsatisfied is .49. For a wife who reported that she avoided handling differences and that her husband confronted differences, the predicted probability of reporting having been unsatisfied is .49. For a wife who reported that she avoided handling differences and that her husband avoided handling differences, the predicted probability of reporting having been unsatisfied is .66.

Table 9

Predicted Probabilities of being Unsatisfied for Subject's and Spouse's Handling of Differences, and Gender

SUBHANDIF	<u>Avoid</u>		<u>Confront</u>	
	<u>Avoid</u>	<u>Confront</u>	<u>Avoid</u>	<u>Confront</u>
SPOHANDIF				
Men	.44	.28	.27	.16
Women	.66	.49	.49	.32

Chapter V

Discussion

Summary and Discussion of Findings

Subject's Handling of Differences and Marital Satisfaction

The hypothesized relationship between an individual's handling of differences and marital satisfaction was not supported. Individuals who reported avoiding handling differences in their marriage were not more likely to have reported being unsatisfied with the marriage than individuals who reported confronting differences. This finding is divergent from previous research which generally supported the hypothesis that avoidance is negatively associated with marital satisfaction (Cahn, 1990; Newton, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Malarkey, 1995; White, 1983). This result is more in line with Rausch, Barry, Hertel, and Swain (1974) who reported that couples in their observational study who avoided conflict with one another were no less comfortable with their marriage than couples who did not.

Spouse's Handling of Differences and Marital Satisfaction

A spouse's handling of differences did predict marital satisfaction, and individuals who reported that their spouse avoided handling differences in their marriage were more likely to have reported having been unsatisfied with the marriage than individuals who reported that their spouse confronted differences. The results indicated that an individual who reported that their spouse avoided handling

differences is approximately one-and-a-half times as likely to have reported having been unsatisfied as an individual who reported that their spouse confronted differences. This finding is consistent with earlier research (Cahn, 1990; Gottman, 1990; Rands, Mellinger, & Levinger, 1981). This result also lends general support to other research indicating a relationship between avoidance and marital dissatisfaction (Noller, Feeney, Bonnell, & Callan, 1994; Sayers, Baucom, Sher, Weiss, & Heyman, 1991; Schaap, Buunk, & Kerkstra, 1988)

Spouse's Handling of Differences, Gender and Marital Satisfaction

Spouse's handling of differences and gender, together, did predict marital satisfaction, and wives who reported that their husbands avoided handling differences in their marriage were more likely to have reported having been unsatisfied with the marriage than husbands who reported that their wives avoided handling differences. The results indicated that wives who reported that their husbands avoided handling differences were more than twice as likely to have reported having been unsatisfied than husbands who reported that their wives avoided handling differences. The results also showed that a model that contained both spouse's handling of differences and gender better predicted marital satisfaction than either variable alone. These results converge with those of previous research (Burke,

Weier, & Harrison, 1976; Christenson & Shenk, 1991; Huston & Ashmore, 1986; Margolin & Wampold, 1981; Weiss, Hops, & Patterson, 1973; Wills, Weiss, & Patterson, 1974).

Gender and Marital Satisfaction

Gender predicted marital satisfaction, and wives were more likely to have reported having been unsatisfied with their marriage than husbands. The results indicated that wives were approximately one-and-a-half times as likely to have reported having been unsatisfied than husbands. Again, this finding is consistent with earlier research (Baucom, Notarius, Burnett, & Haefner, 1990; Gove & Zeiss, 1987).

Subject's and Spouse's Handling of Differences, Gender and Marital Satisfaction

An individual's handling of differences, spouse's handling of differences, and gender, together, predicted marital satisfaction, and wives who reported that they confronted differences in their marriage and that their husbands avoided handling differences were more likely to have reported having been unsatisfied with the marriage than husbands who reported that they confronted differences in their marriage and that their wives avoided handling differences. The results indicated that wives who reported that they confronted differences and that their husbands avoided handling differences were more than one-and-a-half times as likely to have reported having been unsatisfied with their marriage than husbands who reported that they

confronted differences and that their wives avoided handling differences. Notably, husbands and wives who reported that both they and their spouses avoided handling differences in their marriage were most likely to have reported having been unsatisfied with their marriage. The results also indicated that a model that contained spouse's handling of differences and gender better predicted marital satisfaction than one that included these variables as well as subject's handling of differences. These findings are consistent with the results of previous research (Gottman, 1990; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989).

General Implications of the Findings

In general, these findings provide further support for the prevailing assumption that there is a negative association between avoidance of conflict in marriage and marital satisfaction (Fitzpatrick, 1988; Gottman, 1990). These results also provide support for the supposition that marital dissatisfaction is associated with a pattern of marital interaction in which one spouse attempts to confront differences while the other attempts to avoid them (Christenson, 1987; Gottman & Levenson, 1988). These findings also provide evidence that these relationships are influenced by gender. Further, these findings provide general support for both the individual differences and social-structural explanations for gender differences in conflict behavior (Christenson, 1988; Gilligan, 1982;

Jacobson, 1983; Rubin, 1983). These data highlight the importance of studying differences between husbands and wives in regard to how couples handle conflict.

The results of this study provide support for the use of qualitative methodology in the study of intimate relationships like marriage. This methodology provided a means to collect comprehensive information about an individual's unique experience within a marriage with the goal of generating themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The employ of logistic regression analysis provided a relatively sophisticated method of establishing relationships between two of these themes, handling differences and satisfaction. These findings will also contribute to an ongoing research project dedicated to exploring the elements of successful relationships.

The results of this study can also be used to guide interventions for couples. These findings support the rationale for preventive intervention programs aimed at teaching couples how to handle conflicts. Currently, many marital therapies are based upon getting distressed couples to sit down and look closely at their disagreements, face their conflicts, and improve their communication skills. These results suggest that these techniques may need to be modified in order to take into account the conflict avoiding couple's apparent difficulty in confronting problems (Krokoff, Gottman, and Roy, 1988).

Future Directions

The findings in the present study provoke new ideas and questions for further research. Further refinement of the measures used to assess handling differences and satisfaction is one suggestion. Couples at different stages of the family life cycle could be studied. The current sample had minimal distress and high stability. The pattern of findings may be quite different with couples demonstrating a wider range of dissatisfaction and more instability. Given the influence of gender on the current results, future research could study features of women's marital role. The relationship of personality factors, such as desire for closeness versus autonomy, to handling differences could also be explored.

In conclusion, the results of this study indicated that there is negative association between avoidance of handling differences in marriage and marital satisfaction that appears to be influenced by gender. Further research is needed to explore this association. Full comprehension of these processes should improve marital theory and practice.

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