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Marriage Length, Spousal Support, and Marital Satisfaction in Dual-Income Men and Women

The introduction of women into the workforce has led to a steady increase in the number of dual-income couples in the United States. Since dual-income married couples now comprise the majority of couples, they are especially important to study. Approximately half of marriages end in divorce, so an increased knowledge of what makes marriages work is essential. Previous studies indicate that as spousal support increases so does marital satisfaction. This study seeks to confirm the above mentioned relationship for dual-income married couples by studying 143 dual-income couples from varying demographic backgrounds. Also, we will investigate whether couples married for a longer amount of time report greater spousal support and marital satisfaction and whether any gender differences occur.

In more recent years individuals have been getting married at an older age. Some of the factors that have caused this trend are increased concentration on careers and women becoming more involved in the workforce. The structure of today's society supports the continuous emergence of dual-income married couples. The dual-income couple affords two incomes that can be used to supplement their lifestyle and psychological well-being. Married couples serve as a good model for understanding close relationships and the issues surrounding spousal support and marital satisfaction (Hobfoll, Johnson, & Zalcberg-Linetzy, 1993). The U.S. Census Bureau (as cited in Kreider and Fields, 2001) reported that of the approximate 90% of Americans that will get married, nearly half will result in divorce.

The study of spousal support and marital satisfaction is essential in deciphering why a considerable amount of marriages fail. The possibility exists that many individuals marry for the wrong reasons or are not quite in touch with their personal needs. Essentially many problems arise during marriage that may have existed prior to marriage but were not detected or were ignored. Dual-income couples often lead such busy lives that aspects of their marriage may be neglected. Some dual-income couples may be responsible for the care of children and/or other family members in addition to their jobs and other stressors. Barnett (1994) found that when men and women occupy roles that they find enjoyable they find those particular roles least stressful and that is conducive to better mental health. However, there comes a point when

multiple roles can become stressful and harmful to psychological well-being. Marriage within itself can be stressful and if people are accommodating a number of stressful roles then they may need some assistance in coping with these stressors. Individuals that feel supported by their partners report reductions in stress and the support is beneficial (Bolger, Kessler, & Zuckerman, 2000).

In close relationships the support that one can garner from their partner often is highly valued. Social support exists as a paradigm that consists of the actual actions and knowledge that depict support as well as satisfaction with support (Hobfoll et al., 1993). Essentially there are processes involved in social support that are not limited to simply receiving or giving it. In a dual-income couple it is essential that each partner has a working knowledge of each others' support needs. When a couple gets married they make an attempt to form a lifetime bond that incorporates their most happy and unfortunate moments. Their lives become intertwined and they tend to spend a considerable portion of their daily lives at work and with each other.

According to Baucom and Carels (1999), a spouse is considered the most central part of the lives of married couples. They expect more support in addition to a high quality of support from their spouse than they would from other support systems (Collins & Feeney, 2000). In a close relationship such as a marriage it is important to make an effort to understand that there are a myriad of aspects of an individual that can affect each spouse. Rusbult and Van Lange (1996) reported that psychological states and actions of a spouse can have an impact on the other spouses' psychological states and actions. Spousal support is highly relied upon by couples because of its role in the relationship. The combined incomes and lifestyles that dual-income couples ascertain by the joining of two separate entities may afford some intra-marital conflict. Each spouse may have their own ideas and contentions for their income and may have very different goals. For example, each spouse expects that support from their partner will be

integral in the enactment of their personal and relationship goals (Brunstein, Dangelmayer, & Schulthesis, 1996). Particularly for women, spousal support acts as a buffer for positive relationship outcomes such as being satisfied with her marriage as well as goal enactment (Barnet, 1994).

Social support has been evaluated in relation to income and occupation in past research studies. In the dual-income couple, often struggles develop as a result of inequity in work salaries between partners and one partner may feel less adequate in terms of providing for the household. Also, financial problems may arise if both partners are dissatisfied with their income. Stress and tension may develop in a dual-income couple if they find that their salaries barely support their lifestyle. Studies have shown that spousal support can counteract negative behaviors that may arise due to financial problems within the marriage (Dressler, 1985; Pittman & Lloyd, 1988). The work that men do for pay tends to be integral to their feelings of self-worth more so than for women and hence they may experience declined self-worth if they are less successful in their career as compared to their wife (Thoits, 1987; Wheaton, 1990). These men may be more involved in the careers and devote less time to being supportive of their wives and potentially less accepting of their wives' support. Whenever the dual-income male possesses a job that may be described as unstable, the support that his spouse receives from relatives and friends is positively related to the husband's negativity toward their spouse (Conger, Elder, Robertson, & Skinner, 1991).

The perceived adequacy of spousal support may affect on psychological well-being. Dehle, Landers and Larsen (2001) found that spouses who reported receiving less support endorse more depressive symptoms and have difficulty controlling the aspects of their lives that induce stress.

Studies have shown a relationship exists between spousal support and marital satisfaction. The extent to which individuals perceive the adequacy of the spousal support is associated

with marital satisfaction (Dehle et al., 2001). Spousal support is beneficial to both partners, but lack thereof may be detrimental. According to Bégin, Bouthillier, Chartrand, Julien, and Simard (2003), good communication, spousal support, and conflict resolution are all related to the quality of a relationship and essential to the extent to which individuals are satisfied.

The means by which a spouse obtains income may be demanding and detract from quality time between spouses. The possibility exists that over time spouses become more in tune with their needs and discover the mediating impact of spousal support and marital satisfaction. High-combined income and social support contribute directly to dual-career lifestyle satisfaction (Perrone & Worthington, 2001). This alludes to the fact that lack of financial resources contributes to stress within dual-income couples, which in turn affects their support and satisfaction in the relationship. When couples cooperate, utilize coping mechanisms, support each other and divide their tasks equitably they are likely to be satisfied in their relationship (Perrone & Worthington). Social support may reduce conflict, ambiguity and time demands and may be able to decrease work-family conflict. Carlson and Perrewé (1999) utilized work and family domains to assess various models for social support and work-family conflict and for the most part as individuals receive more support as they become more satisfied in their relationships.

Work supervisors may find it necessary to incorporate social support networks for their employees. Greenberger and O'Neil (1993) found that the level of commitment in one's roles (i.e., work, family and parental) does not appear to have any influence on adults' well-being. They also reported that in the work role it is good to have supervisor support as it contributes to positive well-being. Experiences individuals have in one role may affect the experiences they have in other roles. Gender may also play a part in accounting for how people deal with roles and stress. Differences in men and women can help to understand close relationships in a more

informed fashion. The satisfaction and commitment placed into the roles occupied may very well allow people to evaluate themselves more positively and increase their well-being and in turn their close relationships.

Couples that stay married for longer may in fact continue their relationships despite not actually being satisfied and supported. Some couples remain in dissatisfying relationships for various reasons. Some married couples develop attachment anxiety and are fearful of what their lives will entail without their partner. Bradbury and Davila (2001) found that couples that remained married and were unhappy had the highest levels of attachment anxiety initially and over time as compared to divorced and happily married couples. The presence of children may also cause persons dissatisfied with their relationships to stay married. Bradbury and Davila's findings suggest that couples may be at risk for unhappy marriages if they have issues with being abandoned. The stress of the dual-income lifestyle can possibly foster the need to have an attachment to someone. Individual and personality traits may also account for unhappiness in a marriage. The satisfaction that one receives from being in a dual-income marriage is affected by the factors mentioned above, as well as others and individuals should be aware of these factors in order to ensure that they are benefiting from their close relationship. Some of the factors that cause persons to remain in unsatisfying marriages may be present before the individual marries someone.

Logically, if persons have been married for longer periods of time they tend to be older. According to Depner and Ingersoll-Dayton (1985), as couples age they undergo changes within their marriages that influence their financial and health statuses. Older men reported less anxiety and this may be due to maturity and tenure in certain roles (Greenberger & O'Neil, 1993). Over time couples should assess their marriages in order to deduce what areas of the marriage may become stressful. Especially in dual-income couples as each partner ages work may become more strenuous.

Spousal support and marital satisfaction are still necessary regardless of the number of years married. In addition to age of partners in a marriage gender differences may be observed with regards to perceived support and satisfaction with the marriage. Wives tend to display a greater relationship between satisfaction with their marriage and how they perceive social support (Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994). Acitelli and Antonucci also found that spouses viewed themselves as being more supportive than they really were. The previous finding suggests that there is some misunderstanding taking place within couples with regards to the support they give their partner.

The current study is designed to assess the role of length of marriage and gender on spousal support and marital satisfaction in dual-income couples. A variety of reasons may account for the dwindling number of years that couples spend being married. According to Bradbury and Pasch (1998), couples married less than five years account for about a third of divorces. The possibility exists that if a couple can make it over the seemingly five year hump they are well on their way to achieving marital satisfaction as well as being satisfied with the support they receive from their spouse. Specifically we will investigate whether gender differences occur for spousal support and marital satisfaction as mediated by length of marriage. We hypothesize that men will report being more satisfied and supported in their marriages the longer they are married. This hypothesis stems from the fact that men are generally expected to do less household chores and to need less support and are therefore more likely to report that they are receiving these things. Generally, we expect that couples married for longer amounts of time will report being more satisfied and supported in their marriages. Additionally we will seek to verify prior research (e.g. Bégin et al., 2003; Carlson & Perrewé, 1993; Dehle et al., 2001; Greenberger & O'Neil, 1993; Perrone & Worthington, 2001) that indicated that as spousal support increases so does marital satisfaction.

Method

Participants

Participants were 143 dual-income couples selected from a larger study involving various types of couples. Dual-income couples were those married heterosexual couples in which both partners were employed outside the home.

Of the 286 dual-income respondents, the majority (75%) identified as Caucasian, 14% as African-American, and 3% as Asian, American Indian, Hispanic or other. One hundred and eighty-nine of the respondents held at least a Bachelor's degree. The most common type of occupation for both men and women was professional specialty or technical. Couples reported on average an annual household income of \$90,000 to \$99,999. Approximately 31% of dual-income couples had an income above that average. On average women made between \$50,000 and \$59,999 and men made between \$70,000 and \$79,999. Respondents spent an average of 43 hours at work each week. Women reported working on average 39 ($SD = 11$) hours per week and men reported working 46 ($SD = 9$) hours per week. Forty-one percent of couples reported having children. A higher percentage of dual-income men (19%) than women (0%) spent no time per day on household chores and childcare. On average the women spent 4 hours ($SD = 6$) per day on household tasks and childcare compared to the males' average of 5 hours ($SD = 7$).

Procedure

Using a convenience sampling method, participants were approached by researchers and their voluntary participation was solicited. Each partner received his or her own survey along with a self addressed and stamped envelope. The recommended allotted time for completing the survey packet was 15-25 minutes and participants were urged to complete all the questions. Participants were told that ideally they should return the completed survey packet via mail within one week. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were assured and

they were given the opportunity to not participate if they so desired. Each survey packet contained contact information for the supervisor of the research as well as a debriefing statement at the end of the packet.

Measures

Satisfaction with dual-income lifestyle.

Perrone and Worthington (2001) derived this scale from Diener, Emmons, Laresen, and Griffin's (1985) Satisfaction with Life Scale. This five item measure was used to assess the satisfaction each partner is receiving or may not be receiving due to their dual-income lifestyle. All items were rated on a 5-point scale with anchors ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree. Higher scores indicated greater satisfaction with dual-income lifestyle. Diener et al.'s reliability of the scale was high with the Chronbach's alpha value above 0.8 ($\alpha = 0.82$) and we found $\alpha = 0.83$ using our sample. Example questions included "I am satisfied with my dual-income lifestyle" and "For me, having a career/job and having a partner with a career/job is my ideal lifestyle."

Social support. The authors composed this scale in order to measure the emotional social support received from the spouse. The inventory consisted of six questions that were rated on a scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Higher scores indicated greater social support from partner. The questions were as follows: "My partner asks me regularly about my day," "When I have a tough day, my partner tries to cheer me up," "My partner is sympathetic when I am upset," "When I am frustrated my partner listens to me," "My partner accepts me completely," and "My partner cares about me." The Chronbach alpha was .85 for our sample.

Marital Satisfaction. Marital Satisfaction was assessed by using two subscales from The Enrich Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS, Olson, Fournier, & Druckman, 1983) which has 10 items. For the Marital Satisfaction subscale each question represented one of the areas assessed by the full length inventory. The full length

inventory assesses 10 areas and this study assessed nine of the 10 areas. The area that was not assessed was the one that referred to children as all participants did not have children. Items included "I am very happy with how we handle role responsibilities in our marriage," "My partner and I understand each other perfectly," and "Our relationship is a perfect success." The items were rated on a 5 point scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. Higher scores indicate that the couple is satisfied with most areas of their marital relationship and are compatible with each other. Fowers and Olson (1989) found a high reliability of the EMS with the Chronbach's alpha value above 0.8 ($\alpha = 0.86$) and we found $\alpha = 0.84$ using our sample. The validity of the scale was evident because of its ability to distinguish distressed from non-distressed couples. Olson, McCubbin, Barnes, Larsen, Muxen, and Wilson (1989) found a strong positive correlation between the EMS Scale and the Family Satisfaction Scale, which provides construct validity evidence for the scale.

Results

The number of years ($M = 18.24$, $SD = 10.73$) that each dual-income couple has been married was divided into three sub-categories. The first category contained those participants who had been married for between 0 and 5 years. The second category contained those married between 6 and 10 years and the final category contained those married for 11 years or more. A two-way ANOVA was used to compare couples in each marriage category and their reported spousal support and gender. The two-way ANOVA did not reveal any differences in spousal support for each sub-category based on length of marriage, $F(248, 2) = .646$, $p = .525$. However, men and women reported significantly different levels of spousal support, $F(248, 1) = 260.59$, $p = .0001$. Scheffé comparisons indicated that for all three marriage categories men reported higher levels of spousal support than women. For those couples married for 5

years and under, men reported an average value of social support to be 35.12 and women reported on average 24.13. Men married between 6 and 10 years reported higher levels of marital satisfaction ($M = 35.50$) than women ($M = 24.64$). Couples married for 11 years or more had men reporting their level of spousal support to be 36.11 and women reporting 24.85.

Also, a two-way ANOVA comparing couples in each marriage category and their reported marital satisfaction and gender was calculated. The two-way ANOVA did not reveal any differences in marital satisfaction for each sub-category based on length of marriage, $F(245, 2) = .068, p = .934$. The comparison between gender and marital satisfaction approached significance; men and women reported different levels of marital satisfaction, $F(245, 1) = 3.83, p = .052$. Men reported higher marital satisfaction ($M = 33.82, SD = 7.33$) than women ($M = 32.06, SD = 6.01$) across all marriage categories. Scheffé comparisons indicated that for couples in all three marriage categories men reported higher levels of marital satisfaction. Men married 5 years or less reported higher levels of marital satisfaction ($M = 35.23$) than women ($M = 31.25$). Men married between 6 and 10 years inclusive reported higher levels of marital satisfaction ($M = 33.14$) than women ($M = 32.19$). Men married for over 11 years reported on average a marital satisfaction value of 33.70 and women reported on average 32.18.

Previous research (Bégin et al., 2003; Carlson & Perrewé, 1993; Dehle et al., 2001; Greenberger & O'Neil, 1993; Perrone & Worthington, 2001) showed that spousal support and marital satisfaction are positively correlated. We calculated Pearson correlations for marital satisfaction and spousal support for couples and also separate correlations for men and for women. All correlations were significant and positive as predicted. Spousal support is positively correlated with marital satisfaction ($r = .414, p < .01$). For men, spousal support and marital satisfaction was strongly correlated ($r = .681, p < .01$). Also, for women there was a

strong correlation between spousal support and marital satisfaction ($r = .696, p < .01$).

Discussion

This research examined spousal support and marital satisfaction as mediated by length and gender. Unexpectedly, couples married for longer did not report significantly higher levels of spousal support and/or marital satisfaction. However, couples did report differences in marital satisfaction and spousal support based on gender. Men reported higher marital satisfaction and social support than women across all marital categories. Spousal support is positively correlated with marital satisfaction; as spousal support increases so does marital satisfaction. The correlations support current literature (e.g. Bégin et al., 2003; Carlson & Perrewé, 1993; Dehle et al., 2001; Greenberger & O'Neil, 1993; Perrone & Worthington, 2001) on spousal support and marital satisfaction.

Not a lot of research implicates whether length of marriage influences couples' feelings of support and satisfaction. In this study length of marriage does not appear to influence how couples report feeling supported and satisfied. Other aspects of marriage will have an influence on the number of years a couple will stay married for. Underlying issues such as lack of communication and failure to compromise may serve as an explanation for why more recent marriages are lasting for shorter periods of time. Also, those persons that were unhappy could have been divorced or not studied in this particular research. The data collected in this study showed that over 50% of the dual-income couples had been married for over 11 years. This shows that more persons in our sample remained married for a longer amount of time and that these marriages would have begun in an earlier time period. This finding may have implications for the findings of Bradbury and Davila (2001) which indicated that often times unhappy couples stay married. The roles of spousal support, marital satisfaction and length

of marriage may be mediated by other social and relationship factors along with gender.

Dual-income heterosexual couples are the dominant couple type and it is interesting to critically examine gender. The possibility that inherent gender characteristics may influence the sustainability of a marriage may have serious connotations for the dual-income heterosexual couple. Societal standards have progressed over the years, but household duties are still primarily assigned to women in marriages. As a result men are less likely to feel that they are not supported or satisfied in their marriages. Prior to entering a marriage, couples may want to discuss their expectations in terms of how they expect to be supported and what things they require to feel satisfied in a long-term relationship. Men are portrayed as the less dependent counterpart of a heterosexual dual-income couple and therefore they may be less likely to place as high a value as women on spousal support. In turn if there is less of a value being placed on spousal support by men then they are likely to report higher values of spousal support and marital satisfaction. Society and/or a combination of inherent gender characteristics contribute to the decline in feelings of spousal support and marital satisfaction.

This current study has a few limitations. The surveys administered are a form of self-report and there is no way to know if participants accurately completed their surveys. Their answers may have been subjective, that is, one spouse may have answered in such a way as to not taint the image of their partner. Also, the participants may have taken into consideration societal expectations while completing the survey. Participants may have felt the need to portray happy marriages despite feelings of unhappiness because of the negative connotation of divorce and alleged societal gender differences. As a participant completed the various scales included in the survey packet there may have been some ambiguity in the

questions and since the researchers were not present at the time of completion participants were left to their own interpretations.

The variability on most demographic variables, except for ethnicity, in the current study allows for generalizability of the results. The current sample does not demonstrate as wide a variety in terms of ethnicity as we would have liked. Most of the participants are Caucasian and there may be different conclusions in a more ethnically diverse sample. In America, the population of minority groups is steadily increasing and so there is a need for more representative research. The possibility also exists that the variability of the sample does not allow for more detailed analysis. Perhaps closer examination of couples based on their income would provide interesting findings. Income plays a role in any marriage. Differences may occur between lower and higher income dual-income couples. Stressors in the environment are likely to interfere with the support and satisfaction that each partner experiences.

In addition, the gender differences found in this study can be more thoroughly investigated. Attitudes towards marriage and its definition may differ between men and women. By finding out what marriage is for men and women we may better be able to decipher why so many marriages end in divorce. Expectations play a key role in the sustenance of a marriage. Essentially couples may want to discuss what expectations they have for a close relationship and for marriage. After doing so a couple may not be as compatible as they thought or a partner may not be willing to make compromises. Early on a couple can make appropriate decisions based on their openness with their partner. Specifically dual-income couples need to realize the factors that may make their circumstances particularly difficult and how they plan to deal with them.

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