

Summary

Systematic Review of Longitudinal Studies with Couples on Marital Quality, Satisfaction, and Adjustment

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Researchers have long examined marital happiness with the keywords of marital/relationship quality, satisfaction, and adjustment for many years. Some researchers (e.g., Rogge et al., 2017) use these concepts synonymously; some (e.g., Delatorre & Wagner, 2020; Erbek et al., 2005; Li & Fung 2011; Rusbult et al., 1998) state that given concepts differ in their scopes and measurements. Marital quality, marital satisfaction, or marital adjustment are much-studied topics because they determine marital maintenance, separation, and divorce.

Marital quality has been conceptualized as happiness in marriage, the frequency of activities that couples do together, and thoughts or actions that will lead to divorce (Amato et al., 2003). Marital satisfaction is the subjective evaluation of the level of meeting the expectations of individuals about their marriage (Fincham & Rogge, 2010). This subjective assessment includes the partners' response to each other's needs in terms of friendship, sexuality, and intimacy (Rusbult et al., 1998) and budget management, social activity, household responsibilities, and relationship experiences with children (Burr, 1970). Marital adjustment, on the other hand, includes getting used to the marital relationship, adapting to marriage and each other, and approaching spouses' roles and responsibilities in marriage as a team rather than as two separate individuals (Kendrick & Drentea, 2016). To summarize in general, marital quality reflects the positive and negative aspects of the relationship; marital satisfaction reflects the positive emotions that individuals feel when they think about their marriage; on the other hand, marital adjustment can be defined as the partners getting used to marriage/to each other, adapting and becoming a team.

This systematic review focuses on the variables of marital quality, satisfaction, and adjustment. The review has two main objectives: to create a descriptive profile of longitudinal studies with married couples and to determine the variables that predict the change in the marriage

dynamics over time or the variables predicted by these marriage dynamics.

Method

Reviewing and Selection Process

In this review, the studies conducted in Web of Science and ScienceDirect databases between 1990-2021 were searched in English using the keywords "marital quality", "marital satisfaction", "marital adjustment", "couple" and "longitudinal".

Longitudinal studies, studies in which both of the couples participated in the research, studies in which a measure of marital quality, satisfaction, or adjustment was taken in the research, studies in English, and research articles were included in the review.

As a result, a total of 212 articles were reached (Web of Science = 174, ScienceDirect = 38). 138 of them which did not meet the inclusion criteria ($n = 123$) and repeated articles ($n = 15$), were excluded. Consequently, 74 articles were included in this review.

Results

In this systematic review, it is seen that most of the studies were conducted in the United States ($n = 40$). Regarding data collection methods, among 74 studies, the data were collected via the interview method only; 46 of them were collected solely by the self-report method. In addition, there are 27 studies using both self-report and other supplementary data collection methods. Additional data collection methods included interview ($n = 16$), laboratory study ($n = 9$), video/video recording ($n = 7$), physiological data/measurement ($n = 4$), and observation ($n = 2$). Experimental designs were used in only 3 of the studies, and a quasi-experimental design was used in only one study. The study with the lowest number of participants (Konstam et al., 1998) was conducted

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with 36 couples, and the study with the highest number of participants (Erol & Orth, 2014) was conducted with 6,116 couples. In 7 studies, an intervention program was applied to the participants. The shortest study lasted 6 weeks (Zhang et al., 2016), and the longest study lasted 17 years (Hwang et al., 2021).

Although all the articles included in the review were conducted with couples, nevertheless there were some characteristics of the couples that came forward. Therefore, studies could be examined under 5 categories: (1) married or cohabiting couples, (2) newly married couples, (3) couples struggling with an illness, (4) pregnant couples, and (5) couples with children.

Among the 5 categories, the married/cohabiting couples category has the highest number of variables that positively and negatively affect marital dynamics. In studies conducted with married/cohabiting couples ($n = 27$), the variables that *positively* predict marital dynamics are emotional regulation (Bloch et al., 2014), self-concept clarity (Parise et al., 2019), positive change in the self-esteem of the partners (Erol & Orth, 2014), the religious and sectarian similarities of the partners (Hwang et al., 2021), receiving a training/intervention about the marital relationship (Cordova et al., 2014; Owen et al., 2019), premarital empathy (Plopa et al., 2019), migration history of both partners (Johnson et al., 2019), women's job loss (Faulkner et al., 2005), intrusive parenting perception in women and men (Parise et al., 2017), a higher locus of internal control in men than in women (Lee & McKinnish, 2019), positive thinking about the relationship, and high relationship identity (Acitelli et al., 1999).

The present review study found that some variables *negatively* predict the marital dynamics of married/cohabiting couples, such as women's higher education than men, women's full-time job, having conflicts with their partners, having non-traditional marriage attitudes (Yi et al., 2019), partners' work-family conflict experience (Burch, 2020), great differences between partners in terms of mental health (Gerstorff et al., 2013), transition to parenthood (Keizer & Schenk, 2012), large differences between partners in alcohol use (Birditt et al., 2018; Foulstone et al., 2016), economic pressure (Conger et al., 1999), male external locus of control (Lee & McKinnish, 2019), partner overwork (Lavner & Clark, 2017), male depressive symptoms (Wu et al., 2021), the difference in acceptance of gender roles (Faulkner et al., 2005), more conflict frequency, more withdrawal behavior and less constructive conflict behaviors (Johnson et al., 2018).

On the other hand, the variables that *positively* predicted marital dynamics in studies conducted with newlywed couples ($n = 19$) stand out; these are namely

premarital relationship adjustment and life satisfaction (Stanley et al., 2012), relational self-regulation (Halford et al., 2007), secure attachment (Senchak & Leonard, 1992), trust in the decision to marriage (Johnson & Anderson, 2013), moving to a poor neighborhood (Nguyen et al., 2017), emotional forgiveness in men and women (He et al., 2018), daily communication and conflict resolution in women, conflict resolution in men (Li et al., 2018), direct negative behaviors of couples towards each other in case of serious problems in the relationship (e.g., blame) (McNulty & Russell, 2010), and collaborative conflict resolution style in partners (Li et al., 2019).

Variables that *negatively* predicted marital dynamics in studies conducted with newlywed couples are men's suppression of their emotions and women's avoidant attachment (Velotti et al., 2016), moving to a wealthy neighborhood (Nguyen et al., 2017), exposure to violence (Leonard et al., 2014), destructive conflict resolution style in partners (Li et al., 2019), premarital cohabitation (Brown et al., 2006), the direct negative behavior of couples towards each other in case of minor problems in the relationship (e.g., blame) (McNulty & Russell, 2010), and a high level of tension in the first year of marriage (Manalel et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the studies conducted with couples struggling with a disease ($n = 9$), reported a single variable that *positively* predicted the marital dynamics of couples which is the postoperative physical health of prostate cancer patients and the mental health of their partners (Ross et al., 2016). On the other side, the variables that *negatively* predict marital dynamics in couples struggling with an illness were listed as the postpartum period and having a difficult-tempered child in couples with asthma or suspected asthma (Klinnert et al., 1992), heart transplantation (Konstam et al., 1998), colon cancer treatment process (Northouse et al., 2000), risk of Huntington's disease (Richard & Williams, 2004), the increase in the psychological distress of prostate cancer patients (Couper et al., 2009), father-mother role conflict in parents of children with leukemia (Burns et al., 2017), and exposure to deep brain stimulation (Baertschi et al., 2019).

Besides, variables that *positively* predicted marital dynamics in pregnant couples ($n = 9$) are relationship quality before birth (Le et al., 2016), men's use of positive humor (Theisen et al., 2019), parents' supportive parenting behaviors in infancy (Durtschi et al., 2017), postpartum happiness of fathers with their children (Stertz & Wiese, 2020) and resilience after baby loss (Lang et al., 2004).

Variables that *negatively* predict marital dynamics in pregnant couples are noted as anxiety, depression, low constructive communication and short relationship duration (Trillingsgaard et al., 2014), high neuroticism and

low agreeableness of partners (Marshall et al., 2015), hostile attitudes of women and men's outburst tendency (Sotskova et al., 2015), transition to the second child (Volling et al., 2015), fathers' higher parenting stress (Durtschi et al., 2017), women's use of offensive humor, fathers' low use of relational humor, and are facing an unplanned pregnancy (Theisen et al., 2019).

According to the studies reviewed, variables that *positively* predict marital dynamics in couples with children ($n = 10$) are that both partners are working (Helms et al., 2010), the alienation stress in a country (Hou et al., 2018), and mothers' self-esteem levels (El Ghaziri et al., 2019).

Finally, the variables that *negatively* predict marital dynamics in couples with children are as follows: Gender-based attributions of couples (Helms et al., 2006), work pressure (Sun et al., 2017), and the parenting process (El Ghaziri et al., 2019; Seo, 2020).

Discussion and Conclusion

In this study, a systematic review of the longitudinal research conducted with couples with the keywords of marital quality, satisfaction, and adjustment was conducted.

It has been striking to observe that there is no study conducted in Turkey within the scope of reviewing criteria. Conducting similar studies in Turkey would make a great contribution to the literature and fill a huge gap in the area of marriage/relationship studies. More than half of the studies included in the review were conducted in the USA. Considering that the majority of the findings obtained within the scope of our systematic review were obtained from studies conducted with Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) samples (Henrich et al., 2010), it is obvious that they have low generalizability to samples from non-WEIRD cultures.

For the generalizability of the findings, it has been suggested that future studies should be carried out with larger (Baertschi et al., 2019; Foulstone et al., 2016; Gottman & Levenson, 2002; Konstam et al., 1998; Northouse et al., 2000; Plopa et al., 2019) and diverse samples (Hou et al., 2018; Le et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2021). In addition, longitudinal studies were conducted with participants from different ethnic origins (Erol & Orth, 2014; McNulty & Russell, 2010; Nguyen et al., 2017; Hammett et al., 2021) and with different religious beliefs (Hwang et al., 2021) will make significant contributions to the literature.

In conclusion, when the findings were evaluated as a whole, many variables that predicted marriage dynamics and were also predicted by marriage dynamics were reached. A general interpretation might be that the actor

effects were seen intensely, considering only the frequencies of the findings pointing to the actor and partner effect. The aforementioned interpretation is also consistent with the given literature findings (Joel et al., 2020).

Regarding limitations of the present review study, the number of keywords and the number of searched databases might be taken into consideration. To illustrate, only "marital quality", "marital satisfaction" and "marital adjustment" were used as keywords while reviewing the literature. In addition, only articles published in English were included, and Web of Science and ScienceDirect were the only databases that benefited.

The findings presented in this review article can be used to increase the awareness of individuals in practice studies to be carried out with couples. It is expected that future research and applications will fill the gaps in the literature by considering the findings presented above, and this review will be a practical resource in terms of relationship research.