Marital Interaction: What Are Its Predictors?

SUSAN HERRICK

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ABSTRACT: A study involving 20 married couples was conducted to find the best predictors of marital interaction. The age of the couple, the length of marriage, and the number of children living at home were seen as possible predictors. The Parental Stress Index was completed by those couples who had children living at home, while all couples completed a biological background information sheet. Each couple recorded two conversations between themselves. Each couple's interaction was given a rating of affection and hostility. Results showed the number of children as predictive of fewer compliments, high hostility ratings, low affectionate ratings, and more disagreements. Shorter lengths of marriages were predictive of more negative statements, while longer marriages predicted low interaction rates.

A great deal of research has focused on marriages and the way in which couples interact (e.g., Gottman & Levenson, 1992; Levenson & Gottman, 1983; Revenstorf, Vogel, Wegener, Halweg, & Schindler, 1980). However, what is most influential to marital interaction? One factor could be age. Research involving middle-aged and older couples revealed that marital interaction is more affectively positive for older couples (Levenson, Cartensen, & Gottman, 1994). Marital interaction was found to be less physiologically arousing for older couples than for those of middle-age. These findings were consistent with other research in which marital happiness increases with age (Guilford & Bengston, 1979). If there is a relationship between marital interaction and happiness in marriages, then older couples may interact more positively, but perhaps less often due to low arousal.

However, age is confounded with the length of marriage. Age often has not been evaluated as a predictor of marital interaction. The majority of studies have instead been focused primarily on length of marriage as a predictor, ruling out the role that age may have as an influence. Some research has suggested that the longer couples are married, the lower their marital satisfaction tends to be (Mathews & Milhanovich, 1963, Luckey, 1966; Paris & Luckey, 1966). However, still other studies have shown that this satisfaction does not merely decrease steadily, but rather it revives and increases later in the marriage (Burr, 1970; Figley, 1973; Rollins & Cannon, 1974). Rollins and Cannon represent marital satisfaction with a U-shaped curve. Marital interaction is likely to relate directly to the degree of marital satisfaction or dissatisfaction; the two may even mirror one another. If this is the case, then couples who have been married for only a short amount of time are likely to have more negative interaction than couples who have been married longer, based on the U-shaped curve, representative of marital satisfaction.

One reason for this U-shaped curve in marital satisfaction, which is perhaps a reflection of the pattern of marital interaction, is the presence of children. Much research has shown children as the primary reason for changes in marriages. According to Hoffman and Levant (1985), children are seen as positive, in that they derive from the love that spouses feel for one another; however, couples should not be quick to assume that having children will solve any problems they may have, for children usually aggravate marital tensions. Belsky (1990) found in his research that children are often a source of stress and strain in marriages. Children may also influence communication patterns. Feldman (1965) found that childless couples were more communicative, felt closer to each other, had higher marital satisfaction, and placed a higher value on their marriage. Couples with children talked less to one another, and upon doing so, spoke primarily about their children.

The present study seeks to find the best predictors of marital interaction. The age of the couple, the length of marriage, and the number of children living at home, are hypothesized to be the three most notable predictors. Because children have been found to create a lot of stress and to have negative effects overall upon marriages, they are hypothesized to be the highest predictor, leading to low interaction, increased disagreements, increased negative statements, and high hostility ratings.

The number of years the couple has been married is hypothesized to be the second highest predictor. More negative statements, disagreements, and higher hostility ratings among couples who have been married for a short time is predicted; but these should increase (to positive effects) as the length of marriage increases. Fewer negative statements and disagreements, as well as lower hostility ratings, are expected to be prominent among couples who have been married for a long period of time (18+ years).

Because past research suggests that with age comes less arousal, yet happier times, age is hypothesized to be the third best predictor of marital interaction. Thus, less interaction and fewer disagreements and negative statements are predicted as couples' ages increase.

SUSAN HERRICK, a fourth-year senior and Psychology major, wrote this paper for P429, *Advanced Lab in Developmental Psychology*. She plans to specialize in marital and family therapy. "Married couples and the way they interact interest me," states the author, "as well as the impact that parents have upon their children. From this study's finding, one can see that children themselves appear to impact their parents' interactions greatly."

METHOD

Participants
A total of 20 married couples, between the ages of 20 and 55 (mean = 34.2 years), were recruited as acquaintances of the researcher to participate in this study. Three-percent of subjects were African-American, 5% Hispanic, and the remaining 92% were Caucasian. The education levels varied between couples, as well as within. Ten-percent never completed high school, while 38% did. Twenty-percent completed 1 to 3 years of college, while 33% finished 4 years or more. Couples' marriages ranged in length from .5 years to 23 years (mean = 9.98 years). Eighty-percent of the couples had children, ranging in age from 4 weeks old to 21 years (mean = 9.92 years).

Research Design
A Regression design was completed in order to find the relationship between marital interaction and the following predictors: age of couple, length of marriage (measured in years), and the number of children living at home with the couple. Criterion variables included the following: playful teasing, compliments, negative statements about the other, disagreements with the previous statement, rating of affection, rating of hostility, and amount of interaction.

Coding Scheme
The frequency of four types of statements, two positive and two negative were coded. They were defined as follows:

• Compliment—an expression of esteem, respect, or admiration; a flattering remark or idiom, with percentage agreement of intercoder reliability equal to 100%.
• Playful teasing—a joking remark directed toward one's spouse, yet not intended to hurt the other's feelings; usually resulting in both parties laughing, with reliability equal to 92%.
• Negative statement about the other—a statement of such can be directly or indirectly made; includes criticism, sarcasm, put-downs, complaints, and nagging, with reliability equal to 72%.
• Disagreement with spouse's previous statement—statement that only shows disagreement with the most previous statement made by spouse, with reliability equal to 85%.

Each conversation was given a rating of affection and a rating of hostility, both on a scale of 1 (low) to 3 (high). Affection was defined positively as a moderate feeling or emotion (i.e.. fondness); while hostility was defined as conflict, opposition, or resistance.

A rating of 1 on both scales (reliability equal to 100%) was indicative of no affection or hostility shown. A rating of 2 (reliability equal to 75%) was representative of an average or normal amount of affection and hostility between couples. Such a rating included the use of idioms, playful teasing, and compliments when using the affectionate scale. A hostility rating of 2 was typically recorded due to a number of disagreements, negative statements made, and/or voices raised. A rating of 3 on both scales was indicative of the extreme of both affection and hostility (i.e., overly affectionate and hostility that results in yelling and violence). Such a rating was

not predicted to be used, due to the likelihood that couples would practice some self-censorship in the recordings of their conversations.

An additional code was No Interaction, which was defined as the amount of time that the couple did not interact verbally with one another; consequently, it was coded according to the percentage of time no interaction took place. This was measured using a stopwatch and by timing the silences between each couple.

Questionnaire
The Parental Stress Index (PSI) was administered to those couples with children. The PSI has been widely used as an accurate measure of parental stress. Questions inquired about each subject's feelings of happiness with oneself and his or her children, evaluations of oneself as a parent, and particular behaviors shown by the child in general. The response format of the scale ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). The lower the response, the more stress indicated.

Procedure
All subjects filled out a biological background information sheet, which inquired about various demographic characteristics of the couple; such as age, race, and the highest level of education completed. In addition, couples were also asked to report the number of years they had been married and the number of children they had living at home. Those subjects with children were further asked to complete the Parental Stress Index.

An audiocassette recorder and a blank cassette were given to each couple, who were then instructed to record two conversations between themselves (children could be present) during the course of two to three days. Subjects were advised that the ideal time for such a conversation would be during dinner, for this is often a time for a naturally occurring conversation. However, subjects were informed that if this was not possible, then they should choose a time that is convenient for them. The researcher stressed that it was important that the conversations not be forced. The lengths of the conversations were left to the discretion of each couple.

RESULTS
A multiple regression was performed in order to determine the best predictors of marital interaction (refer to Table 1). The number of children living at home was the highest predictor of fewer compliments made (R^2 =.220, adjusted R^2 = .200), increased disagreements with the previous statement (R^2 = .204, adjusted R^2 =.183), high hostility ratings (R^2 = .080, adjusted R^2 = .062), and low ratings of affection (R^2 = .371, adjusted R^2 = .355).

The length of marriage was the highest predictor of no interaction (R^2 = 0.152, adjusted R^2 = .130) and negative statements (R^2 = .14, adjusted R^2 = .118). Education was found to be the best predictor of low ratings of hostility (R^2 = .203, adjusted R^2 = .182). There were no significant results found, however, when a Pearson Correlation was done for the Parental Stress Index and all criterion variables.

Table 1. Multiple Regression Analysis: Unique Contributions (R^2) of Number of Children, Years Married, and Education on Communication Variables.

	Children	Years Married	Education
Compliments	.220	----	----
Disagreements	.204	.180	----
Rating of Affection	.371	----	.093
No Interaction	.053	.152	----
Negative Statements	.130	.140	----
Rating of Hostility	.080	----	.203

DISCUSSION

The major finding in this study is that the number of children is the most predictive of marital interaction, while length of marriage is predictive in some aspects as well. The results support the research that has shown children as burdensome to marriages, or as sources of stress and tension. (Belsky, 1990; White, Booth & Edwards, 1986). Those couples with children were shown to have more disagreements and negative statements made, a higher rating of hostility, fewer compliments, and a lower rating of affection. The research of Hoffman and Manis (1978) shows support for this. For example, they found that couples with children tend to have greater spousal conflict, less interaction, and lower satisfaction with the relationship. Surprisingly, however, parents themselves do not uniformly view children as harmful to their marriage. Furthermore, it is likely that many parents view themselves as average or good in their parenting skills. This may be one reason why the PSI was not correlated with any of the criterion variables. As a result, a correlation may only be seen if parents are at the extreme, meaning they are either a really stressed parent or an extremely not stressed one. On the other hand, perhaps a correlation was not found due to some parents who may not have been altogether truthful in answering the questions asked on the PSI. They may have been worried about making a favorable impression or merely had false perceptions about their own skills in parenting.

Both children and the number of years couples have been married clearly have an influence upon marital interaction. It is likely that the interactions that give way to hostility are mirroring the curvilinear relationship of marital satisfaction suggested earlier in this study. Indeed, those couples who have been married for a relatively long time (16 years or more) have few to no negative statements and disagreements. It is no surprise then that the length of marriage was found to be predictive of marital interaction. A shorter length of marriage (11 years or less) is predictive of the occurrence of more disagreements and more negative statements. Such results indicate that the curvilinear pattern of marital satisfaction is due to two ongoing processes (children and length of marriage) that overlap.

Interestingly, although couples who have been married longer have lower hostility, they also interact less. One could contribute this to the idea that they made fewer hostile statements because they did not talk with one another for very long. Perhaps couples who have been married longer interact less because they are more comfortable with the silence between themselves than those couples who have been married for a shorter amount of time. Furthermore, such couples may know one another better than those who have been married less; thus, they know what the other does or does not expect and need not interact.

Although length of marriage was found to be predictive of martial interaction, how can one be sure that it is acting alone and that age is not having an effect as well? Because age is confounded with length of marriage, past research has not been clear as to which variable is predictive of marital interaction. This study differs from others, in that the effect of age upon length of marriage was taken out when length of marriage was analyzed and ultimately found to be a predictor. Age was also analyzed alone, yet no predictive value upon marital interaction was found. Thus, based on this study's findings, it can be concluded that the length of marriage is what predicts marital interaction, while age does not.

A spurious finding was made in conducting this study, for education was found to be a predictor of interaction between married couples. The more education a couple has, the less hostility and affection they are likely to show toward one another; consequently, these findings result in an appearance of indifference among couples who are more educated. Reasons for this appearance of indifference are unclear, but perhaps such couples have careers which require more of their time and these couples do not see as much of one another. These couples may devote more time to their work than to their relationship with their spouse. In contrast, couples who are less educated have a tendency to be more affectionate and hostile toward one another. Reasons for affection are again unclear, but hostility may be explained by the likelihood that these couples may have jobs in a workforce that places more strenuous demands on them. If this is the case, stress is often the result; which in turn, affects one's relationship and interaction with his or her spouse. Miller (1976) found that role strain can quite easily result from one's job, and such strain can cause marital conflict.

There were some limitations to the study. Some of the couples did not follow the instructions to record two conversations between themselves; as a result, 4 of the 20 couples only submitted one conversation. Consequently, these missing interactions could very well provide pertinent information to the study, particularly because the sample size was initially relatively small. If the sample size was increased, different results may be rendered; age could have a predictive value overall, and perhaps a clearer relationship can be shown between longer marriages and their lack of hostility and interaction. In addition, some of the couples who had children included them in the interaction, while a few others did not. If all children were included in the interaction, a stronger relationship may be seen between children and no interaction. Often parents had the tendency to be drawn in by and to focus primarily upon their children.

Further limitations may be seen in the exclusion of financial income and socioeconomic status as predictors of marital interaction. These factors were not considered due to the lack of variability in the subjects chosen. Therefore, it is probable

that the two could have an influence upon couples' interactions and that a larger, more diverse sample might reveal this.

However, these findings do provide us with more evidence that children, as well as length of marriage, have an impact on marital interaction. These findings may help to reduce conflict in marriages, for knowing the sources of marital stress can give insight into potential solutions. If people are made more aware of their hostility around their children, perhaps they can reduce it and have less stress. Furthermore, these findings can help those who have been married to have hope that things will improve, if they find themselves unhappy now dealing with the strains of parenthood. There is still, however, much more to understand about marital interaction; thus, further research would be useful and should be conducted.

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