

Intimacy and Marital Satisfaction in Spouses

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The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between intimacy and marital satisfaction of couples in different stages of the family life cycle. The Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) questionnaire (Schaefer & Olson, 1981) and a subscale of the Enriching and Nurturing Relationship Issues, Communication and Happiness (ENRICH) questionnaire (Olson, Fournier, & Druckman, 1982) were administered to 57 couples. Significant differences between men and women were found on two of the five aspects of experienced intimacy (sexual and recreational) as well as for social and sexual discrepancy scores (difference between experienced and desired intimacy). With the exception of social intimacy as experienced by women, a positive correlation was found for both sexes between all the components of experienced intimacy and marital satisfaction. No differences were found for experienced intimacy or marital satisfaction according to family developmental stages.

Although intimacy is not limited to the marital relationship, most people marry for the sake of intimacy (Schaefer & Olson, 1981). The married couple forms the core relationship within the traditional family, and the nature of this relationship influences the happiness and level of functioning of the family life (Satir, 1972). A healthy society is dependent on healthy family structures, because family units form the core of society (Trotzer & Trotzer, 1986). Apart from all the marriages that end in divorce, there are also many unhappy marriages where spouses, for various reasons, do not divorce (Vaillant & Vaillant, 1993). Better knowledge of important aspects of the marital relationship, such as the experience of intimacy, could contribute to the development of more effective marital enrichment programs and marital therapy, which in turn will have a positive effect on family and societal functioning.

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Facets of intimacy that are emphasized by researchers include intention, involvement, emotion, sexuality, and gender (Dandeneau & Johnson, 1994; Merves-Okin, Amidon, & Bernt, 1991; Robinson & Blanton, 1993; Schaefer & Olson, 1981; Thomson & Walker, 1989; Tolstedt & Stokes, 1983; Waring, 1981; Waring & Patton, 1984). Most definitions emphasize one or more of the following three characteristics: behavioral interdependency, fulfillment of needs, and emotional attachment (Brehm, 1992). Dandeneau and Johnson (1994) view intimacy as a “relational event in which trusting self-disclosure is responded to with communicated empathy” (p. 18), whereas Schaefer and Olson (1981) describe it as a process that takes place over time, which is never concluded or completely actualized. It entails the acceptance and understanding of, as well as paying attention to, the true self of the other person. (Thomson & Walker, 1989).

Although a degree of experienced intimacy is necessary for normal human development and adaptation (Dandeneau & Johnson, 1994; Stewart, 1992; Waring, 1981), it is impossible to determine exactly what degree of intimacy would be ideal for a person (Schaefer & Olson, 1981). There is a direct relationship between marital intimacy and marital satisfaction (Schaefer & Olson, 1981; Tolstedt & Stokes, 1983), and an increase in marital intimacy has a positive effect on marital satisfaction over a period of time (Dandeneau & Johnson, 1994).

Authors do not always distinguish between intimacy and self-disclosure. Although Chelune, Waring, Vosk, and Sultan (1984) found self-disclosure to be an important covariant of intimacy, Waring and Chelune (1983) came to the conclusion that self-disclosure and intimacy are not the same thing, but that self-disclosure is a determinant of the level of intimacy between spouses. Communication, especially self-disclosure and problem-solving abilities, has a high and direct correlation to the quality of the spousal relationship (Merves-Okin et al., 1991). According to Brehm (1992), satisfied spouses report greater congruence between the sexual activity that they desire and the sexual activity that they experience. In a research study on the characteristics of families that function well, it was found that for both men and women, the satisfaction with their sexual relationship was significantly related to the level of family functioning (Greeff, 1995).

Although spouses tend to have similar views of intimacy and self-disclosure within the marital relationship, it was found that there is a difference between men and women concerning their perceptions of intimacy and marital satisfaction (Merves-Okin et al., 1991). Women also seem to be more able than men to discuss intimate issues openly and with warmth (Merves-Okin et al., 1991; Stewart, 1992). According to Reichman (1989), intimacy fulfills different functions for men and women. For women, an intimate relationship leads to greater satisfaction and happiness within the relationship. Men, on the other hand, carry the effect of an intimate relationship over into other areas of functioning.

A study that made use of the Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Rela-

tionships (PAIR; Schaefer & Olson, 1981) questionnaire found no significant difference between the scores of men and women in the areas of emotional, social, intellectual, and recreational intimacy. Men felt significantly less sexually intimate than women, yet showed a tendency to attach greater value to sexual intimacy than women (Talmadge & Dabbs, 1990). Men and women experience emotional intimacy differently. Men use sexual interaction to increase emotional intimacy, whereas women need emotional intimacy to be sexually intimate.

The primary goal of this study was to determine the connection between intimacy and marital satisfaction for men and women. An additional aim was to determine if there is a difference between the sexes and family developmental stages in the experience of intimacy and marital satisfaction. With the exception of three studies in which intimacy was indeed evaluated, no other South African research could be found that specifically deals with marital satisfaction and intimacy. The results of this research, therefore, contribute to the existing knowledge of marital variables within the broader South African context.

METHOD

Participants

All the participating spouses were members of a single Protestant congregation in the northern suburbs of Cape Town. Permission was received from the church council to use the congregation's address list, and questionnaires were sent to 480 married couples. Participation was anonymous and voluntary. The married couples that returned the questionnaires formed the group to be studied. All together, 65 (13.5%) of the questionnaires were returned. Of these, 57 (11.9%) were fully completed and suitable for analysis. Of the 57 married couples, 53 (93%) had been married only once, three couples had been married previously, and one couple lived apart at the time of the study. The number of years that the couples had been married varied from 1 to 48 years, with a median of 14 years. The period that spouses had known each other before they were married varied from 2 months to 9 years, with a median of 3 years and 4 months. Most couples (50.9%) had two children and 26.3% had three children. Five couples did not have any children. Of the 57 men, 78.9% had received tertiary education (of whom 59.6% had attended university), whereas 70.2% of the women had received tertiary education (of whom 36.8% had attended university). The age categories of the participants were as follows: 24 years and younger, no men and 1 woman (1.8%); 25 to 34 years, 11 men (19.3%) and 17 women (29.8%); 35 to 44 years, 30 men (52.6%) and 26 women (45.6%); 45 to 54 years, 10 men and 10 women (17.5%); 55 to 64 years, 4 men (7.0%) and 1 woman (1.8%); 65 years and older, 2 men and 2 women (3.5%).

The stages of family development according to the age of the oldest child were as follows: No children, $n = 5$; preschool children (1–6 years), $n = 9$; children in primary school (7–12 years), $n = 20$; adolescent children (13–18 years), $n = 10$; and children who have left home (19 + years), $n = 13$.

Measuring Instruments

A biographical questionnaire was developed to gather the following information: sex, age, marital status, length of marriage, time the couples had known each other before marriage, marital satisfaction on a 5-point scale, number of children in the family, age of the oldest child, highest educational qualifications achieved, and whether a divorce had ever been considered.

The Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships (PAIR) questionnaire (Schaefer & Olson, 1981) was used to determine the degree of intimacy that a spouse experiences towards his or her partner. The PAIR is a self-report questionnaire that measures the degree of the desired as well as the actual intimacy on five dimensions, namely: (a) emotional intimacy—the ability to feel close to someone; (b) social intimacy—the ability to share mutual friends and similarities in social networks; (c) sexual intimacy—the ability to share general affection and/or sexual activities; (d) intellectual intimacy—the experience of shared ideas; and (e) recreational intimacy—shared interest in hobbies or joint participation in sport. Scores can be interpreted in terms of both the difference between a person's degree of experienced and desired intimacy, and difference between the couples' scores. Each individual can decide for him- or herself what is good or ideal. The internal reliability coefficient (Cronbach-alpha) of the PAIR is 0.70, and that of the subscales is as follows: emotional, 0.75; social, 0.71; sexual, 0.77; intellectual, 0.70; recreational, 0.70; and conventionality, 0.80 (Schaeffer & Olson, 1981). Concurrent validity was obtained by a significant positive correlation with the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Scale and the Cohesion and Expressiveness scales of the Moos Family Environment Scale (Schaefer & Olson, 1981).

Edmonds's Conventuality scale forms part of the PAIR Questionnaire (Edmonds, 1967; Edmonds, Withers, & Dibatista, 1972). Edmonds et al. (1972) defines marital conventionality as the degree to which married couples direct their assessment of their marriage towards social acceptability. The higher the conventionality score, the more the individual has reacted in a socially desirable way. According to U.S. norms, a conventionality score above 55 is considered to be high, and a score below 20 is considered low ($\bar{X} = 38$, $SD = 17$). A score of 60 on this scale indicates that an individual is pretending to be good (faking) and that he or she has a tendency to idealize the relationship and to minimize problems.

Marital satisfaction of the participants was measured in three ways. The difference (discrepancy score) between the experienced and the desired level of intimacy, according to the PAIR, provides an indirect measurement

of marital satisfaction (Schaefer & Olson, 1981). A subscale of the Enriching & Nurturing Relationship Issues, Communication & Happiness (ENRICH) questionnaire (Olson, Fournier, & Druckman, 1983) was used to conduct a direct measurement of global marital satisfaction. The subscale consists of 10 items (in accordance with the 10 main categories of ENRICH), and a participant must assess each item on a 5-point Likert scale. Aspects covered include personal characteristics of the spouse, role responsibility, communication, conflict resolution, financial issues, handling of spare time, sexual relationship, parental responsibility, relationship with family and friends and religious orientation. A high score indicates adaptability and satisfaction with most aspects of the marital relationship, and a low score reflects a lack of satisfaction and a concern over various aspects of the marriage. The internal reliability coefficient (alpha) of this subscale is 0.81 and the test-retest reliability (after 4 weeks) is 0.86 (Olson et al., 1982). A single-item assessment of marital satisfaction (on a 5-point Likert scale) was included in the biographical questionnaire. This served as an external control for the indirect measurement of marital satisfaction with the PAIR as well as the direct measurement with ENRICH.

Procedure

A letter, explaining the motivation and aim of the project and requesting participation, was sent to each home address of the congregation. Participants' anonymity was guaranteed, and they were assured that no information would be used for anything other than research purposes. Separate questionnaires with the necessary instructions were included for husband and wife, and they were asked to complete the questionnaires on their own. Stamped envelopes were provided so that the completed questionnaires could be mailed to the researcher. The participants were given a 4-week period in which the questionnaires could be returned.

RESULTS

Although a few significant differences were found between men and women's experience of intimacy, no difference with regard to desired intimacy could be found. A significant positive correlation was found between various aspects of intimacy and marital satisfaction. A difference between the sexes was also found regarding discrepancy scores (the difference between experienced and desired intimacy).

Men ($\bar{X} = 37.61$; $SD = 6.12$) and women ($\bar{X} = 37.56$; $SD = 6.53$) achieved virtually the same average scores on the ENRICH marital satisfaction subscale ($t = 0.07$; $p > 0.05$), whereas the conventionality scores (PAIR) were slightly higher for women ($\bar{X} = 64.0$; $SD = 18.71$) than for men ($\bar{X} = 59.21$; $SD = 17.49$; $t = 1.41$; $p > 0.05$).

TABLE 1. Difference Scores Between Men and Women's Experienced Intimacy

| Intimacy | $\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2$ | SD | t |
|--------------|-------------------------|-------|--------|
| Emotional | 1.96 | 16.55 | 0.90 |
| Social | -3.61 | 15.29 | -1.79 |
| Sexual | -10.46 | 18.66 | -4.23* |
| Intellectual | -4.37 | 16.80 | -1.96 |
| Recreation | -5.05 | 12.62 | -3.02* |

* $p < 0.01$

To determine the difference between men and women's experience of intimacy, difference scores were calculated for the measured dimensions of intimacy. A positive difference indicated that men achieved a higher score and vice versa. In Table 1, difference scores (\bar{X}_1 for the men and \bar{X}_2 for the women) for experienced intimacy are indicated on the five dimensions of the PAIR.

According to Table 1, men achieved significantly lower scores than women for their experience of sexual and recreational intimacy.

In Table 2, the correlation between the men's and women's scores on the different dimensions of experienced intimacy and the scores on marital satisfaction (ENRICH, single-item assessment, and discrepancy score) are reported.

According to Table 2, there is a significant positive correlation ($p < 0.01$)

TABLE 2. Product-Moment Correlations Between Men and Women's Experienced Intimacy (PAIR) and Marital Satisfaction Scores

| | Sex | eem | eso | ese | ein | ere | ENRICH |
|-------------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| ENRICH | Male | 0.75** | 0.35** | 0.67** | 0.80** | 0.61** | |
| | Female | 0.80** | 0.21 | 0.38** | 0.79** | 0.72** | |
| single item | Male | 0.70** | 0.32** | 0.74** | 0.70** | 0.64** | 0.71** |
| | Female | 0.77** | 0.12 | 0.55** | 0.73** | 0.71** | 0.74** |
| deem | Male | 0.84** | 0.02 | 0.57** | 0.69** | 0.42** | 0.55** |
| | Female | 0.83** | 0.06 | 0.19 | 0.61** | 0.53** | 0.72** |
| deso | Male | 0.15 | 0.37** | 0.13 | 0.23 | 0.17 | 0.20 |
| | Female | -0.16 | 0.62** | -0.24 | -0.26 | 0.00 | -0.16 |
| dese | Male | 0.59** | 0.13 | 0.81** | 0.63** | 0.45** | 0.56** |
| | Female | 0.52** | 0.01 | 0.73** | 0.44** | 0.45** | 0.46** |
| dein | Male | 0.72** | 0.01 | 0.59** | 0.81** | 0.48** | 0.59** |
| | Female | 0.66** | -0.10 | 0.11 | 0.74** | 0.50** | 0.70** |
| dere | Male | 0.36** | 0.08 | 0.25 | 0.31** | 0.73** | 0.36** |
| | Female | 0.42** | 0.34* | -0.17 | 0.22 | 0.60** | 0.45** |

Note. The following abbreviations have been used: eem: experienced emotional intimacy; eso: experienced social intimacy; ese: experienced sexual intimacy; ein: experienced intellectual intimacy; ere: experienced recreational intimacy; deem: discrepancy for emotional intimacy; deso: discrepancy for social intimacy; dese: discrepancy for sexual intimacy; dein: discrepancy for intellectual intimacy; dere: discrepancy for recreational intimacy; ENRICH: Marital satisfaction scores; single item: single-item evaluation of marital satisfaction

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

TABLE 3. Men and Women's Difference Scores for Desired Level of Intimacy

| Intimacy | $\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2$ | <i>SD</i> | <i>t</i> |
|--------------|-------------------------|-----------|----------|
| Emotional | -0.77 | 13.51 | -0.43 |
| Social | 0.91 | 14.54 | 0.47 |
| Sexual | -2.21 | 15.55 | -1.07 |
| Intellectual | -2.81 | 14.93 | -1.42 |
| Recreational | -1.46 | 11.42 | -0.96 |

p* < 0.05*p* < 0.01

between men's experienced intimacy (all five aspects) and the scores on the ENRICH and single-item assessment of marital satisfaction; whereas only social intimacy does not correlate significantly with the discrepancy scores. As indicated by Table 2, there is a significant positive correlation for the women between experienced intimacy, four of the aspects measured by the PAIR, the scores on the ENRICH, and the single-item assessment of marital satisfaction (social intimacy does not correlate significantly with marital satisfaction measured by the ENRICH subscale or the single-item assessment). Three measurements of experienced intimacy—namely, emotional, intellectual, and recreational intimacy—show a significant positive correlation with the discrepancy scores on the PAIR (social and sexual intimacy do not correlate significantly with the discrepancy scores).

In Table 3, the men and women's difference scores (\bar{X}_1 for the men and \bar{X}_2 for the women) for the desired experience of the five dimensions of intimacy are indicated.

According to Table 3, there is no significant difference between men's and women's desired intimacy. In order to calculate the discrepancy scores, the means of the desired intimacy and the experienced intimacy were individually subtracted from one another for both sexes. This also gave an indirect indication of how satisfied men or women were with their marriages (as a group). The women's discrepancy scores were then subtracted from the men's scores. The absolute values of the discrepancy values were used to

TABLE 4. Difference in Discrepancy Scores for the Five Dimensions of the PAIR

| Intimiteit | $\bar{X}_1 - \bar{X}_2$ | <i>SD</i> | <i>t</i> |
|--------------------|-------------------------|-----------|----------|
| Emotional (h-v) | 2.74 | 19.57 | 1.06 |
| Social (h-v) | -4.53 | 14.24 | -2.40* |
| Sexual (h-v) | -8.25 | 22.62 | -2.75** |
| Intellectual (h-v) | -1.65 | 21.66 | -0.45 |
| Recreational (h-v) | -3.60 | 15.37 | -1.76 |

Note. (h-v) = Experienced minus desired intimacy; \bar{X}_1 = men's mean discrepancy score; \bar{X}_2 = women's mean discrepancy score

p* < 0.05*p* < 0.01

determine whether the men and the women differed significantly. In Table 4 the differences in discrepancy scores (experienced minus desired scores) of the five dimensions of intimacy are indicated.

According to Table 4, women's discrepancy scores for social ($p < 0.05$) and sexual ($p < 0.01$) intimacy differ significantly from those of men. This means that there are greater differences in women's experience of social and sexual intimacy and the degree of desired intimacy in these dimensions than in the case of men.

An analysis of variances was done to determine whether there was a difference between family stages with regard to experience. The test was to determine the difference between experience and desired intimacy (the discrepancy score) for the various dimensions as measured with PAIR, and to determine the difference between men and women in marital satisfaction. No significant differences could be found between family stages for men's and women's intimacy or for their discrepancy scores. As for marital satisfaction (ENRICH), no significant difference could be found between the various family stages.

DISCUSSION

The main purpose of this study was to determine whether there was a difference in the degree to which men and women experience intimacy and marital satisfaction in their marriages. Additional goals were to determine the relationship between intimacy and marital satisfaction, and whether there is any difference between the family developmental stages for the measured constructs.

A comparison was made between men's and women's intimacy on the five dimensions of PAIR. Two of the five aspects of intimacy revealed a significant difference between the sexes. In accordance with Talmadge and Dabbs (1990), it was found that men experienced significantly less sexual intimacy than women. These lower scores could indicate that men are more dissatisfied with their sexual experiences than women. In contrast to the findings of Talmadge and Dabbs (1990), who could not find any difference between the sexes with regard to recreational intimacy, the men achieved significantly lower scores than the women. The men, therefore, were more dissatisfied with recreational aspects of their relationship than the women. As for desired intimacy, no significant difference was found between men and women.

Although there was no significant difference between the sexes concerning experienced or desired social intimacy, there was a significant difference in discrepancy scores (experienced minus desired intimacy). It, therefore, can be concluded that for women there is greater tension between what they experience and what they desire, although they are not less satisfied with their experience of social intimacy. Compared to the men, there

was also a greater difference between the sexual intimacy women experienced and the degree of sexual intimacy they desired. If this finding is compared to the sexual intimacy experienced, where it was found that men are significantly more dissatisfied with their experienced sexual intimacy than women, it could appear as if the findings on sexual intimacy are contradictory. In actual fact, these results refer to different aspects. Although the men experienced significantly less sexual intimacy than the women, it was the women who had a greater need for more intimacy. According to Brehm (1992), satisfied spouses report a greater congruency between the sexual activity they desire and the sexual activity they experience. Merves-Okin et al. (1991) also found little significant difference between men and women's experience of intimacy in marriage. Merves-Okin et al. offer the possible explanation that it is mainly those spouses who feel safe in their relationships and who feel that their partners share their relatively positive feelings about their marriage that are prepared to participate in a research study.

In accordance to the findings of Gilford and Bengtson (1979), the results of this study indicated that there is no significant difference between men and women's experience of marital satisfaction. Having taken into account the men and women's high conventionality scores (PAIR subscale) in the current study, it appears as if the spouses tend to present their relationships as more socially acceptable. As was found by Levinger (1979), spouses tend to create a more positive image of their marriage than is truly the case.

The relationship between the men and women's experienced intimacy as well as intimacy-discrepancy scores and marital satisfaction were also investigated. For men, all the components of experienced intimacy were positively correlated to marital satisfaction (ENRICH and the 5-point single-item assessment). The marital satisfaction score on the PAIR (discrepancy score) for social intimacy did not correlate significantly with the men's intimacy scores. The women's scores for emotional, sexual, intellectual, and recreational intimacy correlated positively with marital satisfaction (ENRICH and the 5-point single-item assessment), yet social intimacy did not correlate significantly to marital satisfaction. The finding that there is a significant connection between some of the intimacy scores and marital satisfaction, corresponds with other research findings. Various researchers have found that a direct connection exists between marital intimacy and the experience of marital satisfaction (Dandeneau & Johnson, 1994; Merves-Okin et al., 1991; Robinson & Blanton, 1993; Tolstedt & Stokes, 1983; Waring, 1981; Waring & Chelune, 1983).

In this study, no significant difference was found between family developmental stages and the experience of social intimacy by both men and women. These findings do not correspond to those of Burr (1970). He found that women (and men) were more satisfied with their social activities during stage two, and that both men and women achieved the lowest scores for satisfaction with their social activities during stage three. The findings of Talmadge and Dabbs (1990) that spouses who had been married for a longer

period experienced less emotional, sexual, intellectual, and recreational intimacy than those who had been married for a shorter time also could not be confirmed. No significant difference was found between men and women's marital satisfaction scores according to family developmental stage, either. This does not correspond to Burr's (1970) findings that men were less satisfied with their marriages during stage one (without children) than during stage three (toddlers at home). Gilford and Bengtson (1979) also report a significant difference between the developmental stages of the family and marital satisfaction.

Based on the findings in this study, the following conclusions can be made: (a) There is a significant difference between men and women's experience of intimacy; (b) men are significantly less satisfied with their experience of sexual intimacy than women; (c) men are significantly less satisfied with the recreational aspects of their relationship than women; (d) there is a greater difference between women's experience of social intimacy and the degree of social intimacy they desire than in the case of men; (e) women show a greater discrepancy between their experience of sexual intimacy and the degree of sexual intimacy that they desire than men do; and (f) a significantly positive correlation exists between the experience of intimacy and marital satisfaction.

On the grounds of the research design, the findings have a few shortcomings. The results can only be generalized to Afrikaans-speaking spouses who are members of a Protestant church. Participants of this study can at most be considered representative of an average-to-high socioeconomic population group, which means that the results are not necessarily representative of families in other socioeconomic and cultural groups. Due to the low percentage of questionnaires that were received, the question arises whether even the realized investigation group was representative of the intended study population. Yet, despite these shortcomings, the significant difference and correlation between men and women's experience of, and need for, intimacy should be taken into account during therapeutic and preventative interventions in the marriages of Afrikaans-speaking South Africans. Because the facilitation of intimacy in marriage has a positive effect on marital satisfaction in the long run (Dandeneau & Johnson, 1994), it is essential to investigate ways of promoting intimacy.

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