

The Role of Personality in Marital Satisfaction among Distressed and Non-Distressed Married Couples

S Manjula^{1*}, VK Dubule², T Indira³ and M Pramod Reddy⁴

¹Clinical Psychologist, Department of Psychiatry, Mamata Medical College, Khammam, India

²Department of Psychology, V.N. Govt. Institute of Arts and Social Sciences, Nagpur, India

³Mamata Medical College, Khammam, India

⁴Professor and HOD, Department of Psychiatry, Mamata Medical College, Khammam, India

*Corresponding Author: S Manjula, Clinical Psychologist, Department of Psychiatry, Mamata Medical College, Khammam, India.

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Abstract

Background: What makes the marital relationship so special? Why do some couples stay together while other marriages end in divorce? Marital distress is so prevalent and difficult to assign a particular reason or factor to the phenomenon. It is, therefore, important to study correlates of marital satisfaction in order to determine what variables could potentially predict the outcome of marital success.

Aim: The current study sought to examine personality traits with reference to marital satisfaction among distressed and non-distressed married couples.

Method: The sample of the study was 600 individuals that are 300 hetero sexual married couples. Convenient sampling method was employed to recruit subjects with the pre-requisite condition that minimum duration of marital relation should be two years. The age of participants ranges from 25 to 50 years. Revised Dyadic Adjustment Scale was used to assess Marital Satisfaction and NEO FFI personality Scale for personality. The Chi square analysis, Pearson's product moment correlation and regression analysis were used as statistical analysis.

Results and Conclusion: Results revealed that neuroticism was more pronounced in distressed couples. Extraversion did not influence marital satisfaction. Individuals with high Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness experiences greater marital satisfaction. A significant positive association emerged on correlations and on regressions neuroticism was a strong negative predictor, conscientiousness was a positive predictor to marital satisfaction. Hence, concluded that personality traits low neuroticism and high conscientiousness has greater influence on marital satisfaction.

Keywords: Personality; Marital Satisfaction (MS)

Introduction

Many marriages described as distressed, unhappy, and in discord, but these had not yet ended in divorce. In comparison to happily married persons, maritally distressed partners are 3 times more likely to have a mood disorder, 2.5 times more likely to have an anxiety disorder, 2 times more likely to have a substance use disorder, and 5.5 times more likely to report problems of domestic violence [1].

As early researchers began to study differences between happy and unhappy marriages, their work was deeply influenced by personality theory, and generally addressed the question "are some personality traits more ideally suited to successful marriage?" [2]. The capacity

to form an intimate relationship with others is considered as an essential developmental task and a principal feature of effective personality development [3]. In time, researchers began to expand research on interpersonal and intra personal factors on marital satisfaction, influenced by underlying personality traits [4]. Understanding the underlying elements that lead to marital satisfaction is essential for identifying how to approach couples seeking treatment for distress in their marriages [5].

Indian women are vulnerable in the context of marriage and social aspects. The Policies made by Indian government, enormously protecting women through, the domestic violence against women act (DV act, 2005) [6]. Women protection services being rendered through Women protection cells established in entire country and attached to women police stations along with family counseling units. As reported by the counselor, of the family counseling center, located in a district headquarters of South India, on an average in a month they receive around fifty to sixty complaints and the female partner come with a cause of marital maladjustment seeking for divorce.

Research on personality traits has a long history in the study of premarital predictors and marital compatibility is affected by the personality characteristics that the two people bring to their marriage [7]. To understand more about this incidence, the present study attempted to examine personality as potential predictor of marital satisfaction, by using dyadic data from married Indian couples with and without distress.

Marital satisfaction and marital distress

Marital satisfaction defined as a state of a person whose tendencies have reached their goal or gained their personal desires [8]. Marital satisfaction is the degree to which an individual's needs, expectations, and desires are being satisfied in their marriage and an individual's personal evaluation of their marriage overall [9]. Marital distress has been defined as situations in which partners experience communication and problem solving difficulties, find difficult to work together and has difficulty in accepting each other's [10]. Research indicates that couple distress co-varies with individual emotional and behavioral disorders above and beyond general distress in other close relationships [11].

Personality and marital satisfaction

There is a relationship between the personality traits and certain domains of reasons (social, psychological, economic and cultural) for divorce [12]. Most research indicates that neuroticism has negative partner effect, meaning men and women whose spouse or partner is high in neuroticism tend to report lower relationship satisfaction, lower adjustment in the relationship [13]. Extraversion associate with the manipulation tactics used during relational interaction, generally yield mixed results or does not contribute to the explanation of the variance in relationship satisfaction [14]. Neurotic traits were positively associated with marital negativity, conflict, which in turn was negatively associated with marital satisfaction Agreeableness, strongly associate with relationship satisfaction through both actor effects and partner effects [15]. High conscientiousness was associated with greater marital satisfaction [13].

The research results on personality and marital relationship show that the two of the five factors in the FFM, openness to experience and agreeableness, are less strong. Thus, the three remaining personality factors, neuroticism, extroversion, and conscientiousness, appear to be the most important in determining how couples experience and adjust to situations and conditions in marital relationships. Conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness to experience have been the least studied personality variables in connection to relationship satisfaction [16].

Aim of the Study

The current study sought to examine personality, with reference to marital satisfaction among distressed and non-distressed married couples.

Hypotheses of the Study

The present study has been hypothesized as firstly, distressed married couples would differ from Non-distressed married couples on the scores of Personality dimensions. Secondly, Personality dimension is expected to be a significant predictor to marital satisfaction.

Method

Sample: The co-relational research design was used in the current study. Convenient sampling technique used to select the sample, comprised of 600 individuals that are 300 hetero sexual married couples. The married couples registered in family counseling centers, district family courts, couples approached for reconciliation were included as couples in distress (hereafter this group is referred to as “Distressed”) and married couples without distress (hereafter this group is referred to as “Non-distressed”) were recruited for the study. Participants were requested for their time and the objectives of the study explained. Those willing to give informed consent and participate in the study were screened based on an inclusion and exclusion criteria. Participants with Age range of 25 - 50 years, married for at least 2 years, must have been married either customarily or legally, must be living in the Khammam town, No history of current or past psychiatric illness or treatment were included and widows, single women, divorcees, those with psychological disorders, Alcohol dependents, Chronic psychological or physical Illness were excluded. Hence, the married couples registered a complaint against spouse in family counseling center (FCC), district family courts located in Khammam district, Telangana state formed the study group. The control group was constituted from local government and private sector employees, staff working in a teaching medical institute. After obtaining the required permission from the officer in-charge the employees having married at least for two years and above were contacted and the objective of the study was explained. The possibility of having distress with the present marital relationship among the individuals who were selected for control group being forecasted through a primary screening.

Study instruments: i) Socio-demographic sheet ii) Big Five Personality Inventory (NEO FFI) iii) Dyadic Adjustment Scale-Revised (DASR).

Socio-demographic data sheet: The subject’s socio-demographic details such as name, age, gender, age at marriage, length of marriage, education, occupation, religion, and economic status were noted in the pro-forma. The primary screening statements were included for eliminating the possible distressed couples of non-distressed married couples group.

The NEO five-factor inventory [17]: NEO FFI is a short form of NEO Personality Inventory-Revised (NEO-PIR), contains 60 items that are to be responded to on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” for the five domains namely, Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness. Each scale consists of 12 items and the cronbach’s alpha reliability scores for subscales are 0.76 for neuroticism 0.76 for extraversion 0.65 for openness 0.75 for agreeableness and 0.85 for conscientiousness.

Revised dyadic adjustment scale [14]: DAS-R is a 14-item test, on a 5 or 6 point scale with three subscales: Dyadic Consensus, Dyadic Satisfaction and Dyadic Cohesion. The DAS-R is suitable to measure the degree of couple relationship and level of distress. Scores on the RDAS range from 0 to 69, the cut-off score for the RDAS is 48 such that scores of 48 and above indicate non-distress and scores of 47 and below indicate marital/relationship distress. Cronbach’s alpha for DAS-R was reported to be .90 and for subscales, namely consensus, satisfaction and cohesion they were found to be .81, .85 and .80 respectively.

Procedure: To conduct this study, approval was obtained from the Department of Psychology, RTM Nagpur University; Maharashtra. Followed ethical codes specified in the American Psychological Association (APA, 2000) [18]. Participants were assured confidentiality by not requiring their names or initials. A consent form was developed, questionnaires were printed and packaged into envelopes for data collection. Participants were approached on a one on one basis (couples). It was made clear to each participant that they can decline participation at any point of time. A two/three hours’ time was given to each participant to complete the questionnaires. And some participants filled the questionnaires on the spot. The completed questionnaires were collected for scoring and subsequent analysis. The data collection lasted for a period of 4 months starting from august to December in the year 2015. To begin with, an interview was carried out to collect the socio-demographic information followed by specific measures. Descriptive statistics were calculated. Chi square analysis, Pearson Product Moment correlation and regression analysis were used through Statistical Package for Social sciences (SPSS16.0).

Results

The present study investigated on the relationship of Marital Satisfaction and personality dimensions among married Indian couples (n = 600). Demographics were calculated for the obtained sample (N = 576), and the results are summarized in table 1. Two hundred and ninety two participants (n = 292, 50.7%) were categorized under non-distressed married couples group named as NDMC group, and two hundred and eighty four (n = 284, 49.3%) were categorized as distressed married couples group named as DMC group. The average age of participants was 32.69 (SD = 5.78) and ages ranged from 20 to 60. The male and females were equal in number (288; 50%), the majority of participants were Hindus, (n = 449, 78%). In terms of relationship demographics, marriage duration reported as an average of 8.39 years (SD = 6.47), and nearly all participants were in their first marriage (N = 576, 100%).

Demo variables	Particulars	Frequency	%
Category	Non-distressed married couples Group	292	50.7
	Distressed married couples group	284	49.3
Gender	Male	288	50.0
	Female	288	50.0
Age in years	21 - 30	221	38.4
	31 - 40	282	49.0
	41 - 50	63	10.9
	50 above	10	1.7
Age at marriage in years	Below 20	105	18.3
	21 - 30	438	76.0
	31 - 40	33	5.7
Length of marriage in years	Below 5	220	38.2
	6 - 10	233	40.5
	11 - 15	59	10.2
	16 - 20	25	4.3
	Above 20	39	6.8
Education	Primary	61	10.6
	Secondary (SSC, +1, +2)	167	29.0
	Under-Graduation	241	41.8
	Post-Graduation and above post-graduation	107	18.6
Occupation	Agriculture	40	6.9
	Employee/Government sector	63	10.9
	Employee/Private sector	142	24.7
	Home Maker	91	15.8
	Professional career	111	19.3
	Business	76	13.2
	Others	53	9.2
SES	Upper	57	9.9
	Middle upper	11	1.9
	middle	352	61.1
	lower	156	27.1
Religion	Hindu	449	78.0
	Christian	77	13.4
	Muslim	40	6.9
	Others	10	1.7
Domicile	Urban	260	45.1
	Rural	316	54.9

Table 1: Participant characteristics, frequencies and percentages of demo-graphic information.

The personality variables of DMC group significantly differed with NDMC group on Chi square analysis. Hence accepted the research hypotheses, stated as distressed married couples (DMC) would differ from non-distressed couples (NDMC) significantly ($P < 0.05$) on the scores of Personality dimensions, neuroticism ($\chi^2 (1, 576) = 50.64$, on table 2), Openness ($\chi^2 (1, 576) = 2.990$, On table 3), agreeableness ($\chi^2 (1, 576) = 33.05$, on table 5) and conscientiousness ($\chi^2 (1, 576) = 35.56$, table 6). The results indicating that, the couples of NDMC group are cohesive, satisfied and harmonious with their relationship. On correlations (Table 7), Neuroticism (-0.297*) and extraversion (-0.062*) correlated significantly, negatively with marital satisfaction suggesting that higher degree of marital satisfaction will be reported by the individuals with less scores on neuroticism and extraversion dimensions of personality or vice versa. Significant positive correlations of personality dimensions agreeableness (.119*), conscientiousness (.163*) to marital satisfaction indicating that high agreeable and high conscientious individuals scored high on marital satisfaction. However, Openness (.048) dimension did not influence the marital satisfaction. On regressions (Table 8), five personality dimensions were used as predictors to marital satisfaction. The prediction model was statistically significant, $F (14, 561) = 8.284$, $p < .05$ and accounted for approximately 15% of the variance of relationship satisfaction ($R^2 = .171$, Adjusted $R^2 = .151$).

NEO FFI	NDMC	DMC	χ^2
High Neuroticism	124	204	50.64*
Low Neuroticism	168	80	
*P < .05			

Table 2: Difference between non distressed married couples group (NDMC, N = 292) and distressed married couples group (DMC, N = 286) on proportions of NEO FFI, neuroticism (chi-square analysis).

As seen in table 2, Neuroticism was significant between NDMC group and DMC group, $\chi^2 (1, 576) = 50.64$, $p < .05$. Results indicate that DMC group couples with distress have a significantly higher level of neuroticism than NDMC group couples.

NEO FFI	NDMC	DMC	χ^2
High Extraversion	175	167	.076
Low Extraversion	121	112	
*P < .05			

Table 3: Difference between non distressed married couples group (NDMC, N = 292), and distressed married couples group (DMC, N = 284) on proportions of NEO FFI, extraversion. Table 3, results revealed that extraversion was non-significant between NDMC group and DMC groups, $\chi^2 (1, 576) = .076$, $P = >.05$. Extraversion did not influence marital satisfaction.

NEO FFI	NDMC	DMC	χ^2
High Openness	168	143	2.99*
Low Openness	124	141	
*P < .05			

Table 4: Difference between non distressed married couples group (NDMC, N = 292) and distressed married couples group (DMC, N = 286) on proportions of NEO FFI, Openness.

Table 4 show that, a significant difference emerged on openness between NDMC group and DMC group, $\chi^2 (1, 576) = 2.990$, $p < .05$, indicate that Openness is also an influencing factor to marital satisfaction.

NEO FFI	NDMC	DMC	χ^2
High Agreeableness	181	108	33.05*
low Agreeableness	111	176	
*P < .05			

Table 5: Difference between non distressed married couples group (NDMC, N = 292) and distressed married couples group (DMC N = 286) on proportions of NEO FFI agreeableness. Table 5 revealed that agreeableness was statistically significant between NDMC group and DMC groups, $\chi^2 (1, 576) = 33.05, p = <.05$. Results show that agreeableness, have greater influence on marital satisfaction.

NEO FFI	NDMC	DMC	χ^2
High Conscientiousness	170	95	35.56*
Low Conscientiousness	122	189	
*P < .05			

Table 6: Difference between non distressed married couples group (NDMC, N = 292) and distressed married couples group (DMC, N = 286) on proportions of NEO FFI conscientiousness. As seen in table 6, A significant difference emerged on Conscientiousness, between NDMC group and DMC groups, $\chi^2 (1, 576) = 35.56, p < .004$. Results indicate conscientiousness influences marital satisfaction.

Personality Dimensions	Marital satisfaction (r)
Neuroticism	-.297*
Extraversion	-.062*
Openness	.048
Agreeableness	.119*
Conscientiousness	.163*
*P < .05	

Table 7: The correlation between marital satisfaction and neuroticism, extraversion, openness, agreeableness and conscientiousness (N = 576). As seen in table 7, Neuroticism and extraversion correlated significantly, negatively with marital satisfaction suggesting that higher degree of marital satisfaction will be reported by the individuals with less scores on neuroticism and extraversion dimensions of personality or vice versa. Significant positive correlations of personality dimensions agreeableness, conscientiousness to marital satisfaction indicating that high agreeable and high conscientious individuals scored high on marital satisfaction. However, Openness dimension did not influence the marital satisfaction in the study population.

Standard Regression Results	B	SE-B	Beta	't'
Constant	49.045	4.624		10.607*
NEO Neuroticism	-.358	.071	-.208	-5.059*
NEO Extraversion	-.093	.068	-.053	-1.357
NEO Openness	.023	.068	.013	.331
NEO Agreeableness	.068	.047	.058	1.442
NEO Conscientiousness	.061	.052	.049	1.173
*P < .05				

Table 8: Results of standard multiple regression analysis for NEO FFI personality dimensions, as predictors to marital satisfaction. The prediction model was statistically significant, $F (14, 561) = 8.284, p = <.05$, and accounted for approximately 15% of the variance of relationship satisfaction ($R^2 = .171, Adjusted R^2 = .151$). Results indicate that the personality dimension neuroticism, expected to be a significant predictors to marital satisfaction.

Neuroticism	Emotional instability, being maladjusted, nervous, negative affect such as anger, anxiety, and sadness
Extraversion	Sociability, assertiveness, talkativeness and energy, originality and intellectual curiosity, reflects surgency, positive emotions, and tendency to actively seek company of others
Openness	Complexity, depth, appreciate for creativity, curiosity, and a variety of experience
Agreeableness	Sympathy, being cooperative, good-natured, tendency to be compassionate and empathetic
Conscientiousness	Sense of competence, responsibility, socially prescribed, impulse control, the tendency to act in task, goal-directed and to be able to delay gratification
Dyadic consensus	The degree to which couples agree on matters of importance to their relationship
Dyadic satisfaction	The degree to which the couple is satisfied with the relationship
Dyadic cohesion	The degree of closeness and shared activities experienced by the couple

Table 9: Description of sub scales of big five personality inventory (N EOFFI) and revised dyadic adjustment scale (RDAS).

Discussion

Global assessments of personality have shown that the personality characteristics found among satisfied couples are different from those found among dis-satisfied couples [19]. Numerous studies have suggested that the highest levels of neuroticism have been associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction [4]. Individuals high on neuroticism are more likely to experience fear, sadness, guilt, anger and hostility [17]. Consistent to previous studies the present study also revealed that neuroticism was more pronounced in distressed couples which indicates that the individuals experiencing high marital distress. Higher neuroticism being associated with self-rated marital satisfaction [20]. Most of the research indicated that extraverts may have greater marital satisfaction. Extravert individuals are positive, assertive, energetic, joyful, shows interest in other people. These individuals easily influence marital relationship [17]. Contrast to this, the findings of the present study revealed that, though extraversion did not influenced marital satisfaction, non-distressed couples scored high and suggesting that assertiveness and outgoing nature may influence marital relationship. Inconsistent to the previous research, the present study also revealed that the personality dimension openness has significant influence on marital satisfaction. The persons with high openness are creative, inquisitive, introspective, and attentive to inner feelings [17], often experience conflicts due to a tendency of having intellectual arguments that are focused on positions rather than people [21]. Previous research stated that Openness as the weakest among the personality factors in predicting marital satisfaction [22]. On par with the previous research, the present study revealed non-distressed individuals are sociable, cordial, friendly and kind in nature with high agreeableness and experiences greater marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was significantly predicted by two personality dimensions as agreeableness and conscientiousness [23]. The results of the present study also indicate that the individuals with greater marital satisfaction were more careful, committed towards their relationship, accepts partner’s mistakes or faults, meticulous and are more industrious.

In a review of longitudinal studies neuroticism was reported to be a substantial predictor to marital satisfaction. Personality dispositions such as emotional instability or neuroticism created enduring vulnerabilities that affected how couples adapted to stressful experiences and that this adaptation impacted general satisfaction [24]. The neuroticism and decreased marital satisfaction will be mediated by marital interactions high in hostility and low in warmth [25]. Research suggested that high conscientiousness was associated with greater marital satisfaction [20]. Consistent to previous studies, the present study demonstrated that neuroticism was a strong negative predictor; conscientiousness was a positive predictor to marital satisfaction. Individuals with low neuroticism and high conscientiousness will be more satisfied in marriage than those with high neuroticism and low conscientiousness. The prediction model of simple regressions was significant and accounted for 15% of variance of relationship. The personality dimensions neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness and conscientiousness accounted for majority of variance to marital satisfaction. Research on extroversion and marital satisfaction has shown inconsistent results. Some researchers reported that extroversion was associated with marital satisfaction [13] while others found

non-significant or negative correlations between variables [4]. Conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness to experience to be associated with greater marital satisfaction [26].

Conclusion

Based on extensive investigation of previous research, the present study examined personality as potential predictor to marital satisfaction and the findings were in supportive of previous research. Understanding of these elements helps in identifying certain interventional approaches for couples seeking treatment for distress in their marriages. Individuals scored on low neuroticism, high agreeableness and high conscientiousness, indicate greater marital satisfaction. The individuals who scored on high neuroticism, low agreeableness, low conscientiousness, indicate greater marital distress. The personality dimensions Neuroticism and Conscientiousness were significant predictors to marital satisfaction and approached significance. Hence, it is very much important to understand the factors underlying relationship satisfaction, which in turn contribute to the overall well-being of individuals and families.

Future Directions

This information will be useful to counselor educators, counselors who work with distressed couples and the couples themselves. The goals of counseling would include building awareness of how each spouse's attachment style personality contributes to the way they perceive and respond to marital interactions about marital stressors, Identifying best education programs specific to type of couple, to rejuvenate problem couples relationship. Future research needs to clearly identify inclusive elements, such as premarital education, treatment strategies for reducing marital distress for couples in relationship.

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