

Commitment Communication and Length of Marriage: Scratching the seven-year Itch

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Abstract. Previous research indicates that marriage has been shown to be a relationship based in serious investment, which requires maintenance behaviors in order to remain satisfying. With this in mind I wanted to determine why the seven-year itch might exist. In the spring of 2008 I sampled 103 married couples from Wichita, KS and the surrounding area. They were selected through network sampling and asked to complete a survey regarding their marriage. The survey included the self/partner behavioral indicators of commitment scale and Rusbult's commitment scale, which measured behavioral indicators and marriage satisfaction. I looked specifically at the perceived level of tangible reminders offered, the perceived level of creating a relationship together, the perceived integrity of the marriage and the overall satisfaction in the marriage. I hypothesized that as past research has shown, couples in the early years of marriage (0 to 6) will have high levels of behavioral indicators of commitment, followed by a drop in amount during the 7 to 23 year period, and a rise at the 24+ year mark. The results of the survey indicated that my hypothesis was correct. Future research might determine if this curvilinear pattern (being low during mid level marriages) could account for divorce during these years.

1. Introduction

According to Sabatelli (1999) "Most marriage-like relationships were ones in which partners were clearly highly attracted to their relationships and highly invested in their maintenance" (p. 181)[1]. One could assume from this that individuals involved in these relationships consider commitment communication a priority in their relationship. Research findings would indicate otherwise. Marriage has been shown to be a relationship based in serious investment, which requires maintenance behaviors in order to remain satisfying. According to Weigel and Ballard-Reisch (1999) "Maintenance behavior was highest in marriages between 0 to six years, dropped to a low in marriages 15 – 23 years, and rose again in marriages of 24+ years."[2]

Research Questions and Hypothesis

RQ 1: Is there a relationship between the length of a marriage and the amount of behavioral indicators of commitment used?

RQ 2: Is there a relationship between the amount of behavioral indicators of commitment used and the level of relationship satisfaction?

H1: Couples in the early years of marriage (0 to 6) will have high levels of behavioral indicators of commitment, followed by a drop in amount during the 7 to 23 year period, and a rise at the 24+ year mark.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

Participant Recruitment and Scales

COMM 803 Quantitative Research Class students recruited 103 married couples through network sampling throughout the Wichita and the surrounding area. Partners individually completed surveys composed of the self/partner behavioral indicators of commitment scale and Rusbult's commitment scale. They included statements regarding the individual's own commitment communication as well as their perception of their partner's commitment communication. They also rated their current marital satisfaction.

Scale Examples

Commitment Communication

On a scale of 1 to 6, 1 being always and 6 being never, report for Self and Partner how often do you:

- 1) Do things together
- 2) Am honest with her/him

Marital Satisfaction

On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being very dissatisfied and 5 being very satisfied:

- 1) How satisfied are you with your relationship?
- 2) How satisfied are you with your partner?

Data Analysis

To analyze the data a one way MANOVA was calculated using length of marriage (0-6 years, 7-23 years, and 24+ years) as the independent variable and the participants' response to factors addressing: the use of tangible reminders, creating a relationship future, integrity, and marital satisfaction as dependent variables. Wilks' λ indicated a difference between the response of the newly married (0-6 years) and long lasting marriages (24+ years) compared to the mid level marriages (7 to 23 years): Wilks' $\lambda = .788$, $F(3, 103) = 2.943$, $p < .005$, a multivariate $\eta^2 = .123$. Univariate ANOVA results were interpreted using an alpha of 0.05. They revealed the newly married (1)($M = 26.531$, $SD = 1.016$) and long lasting marriages (3)($M = 29.950$, $SD = 1.285$) had a significant difference from mid level marriages (2)($M = 29.723$, $SD = .838$) in regards to tangible reminders $F(3, 103) = 3.495$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .068$. This pattern followed with relationship future with 1($M = 15.656$, $SD = .924$), 2($M = 19.957$, $SD = .762$), and 3($M = 17.250$, $SD = 1.168$) $F(3, 103) = 6.723$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .123$ and with integrity which showed 1($M = 10.938$, $SD = .568$), 2($M = 13.000$, $SD = .469$), and 3($M = 11.900$, $SD = .719$) $F(3, 103) = 3.974$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .076$. Finally marital satisfaction followed the pattern with 1($M = 72.063$, $SD = 2.227$), 2($M = 64.234$, $SD = 1.838$), and 3($M = 70.100$, $SD = 2.817$) $F(3, 103) = 4.041$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = .078$.

Results

The results showed that individuals involved in the early years of marriage (0 to 6 years) and long lasting marriages (24+ years) had higher levels of offering tangible reminders, creating a relationship future, integrity, and satisfaction. Meanwhile, those involved in mid level marriages (7 to 23 years) showed low levels of offering tangible reminders, creating a relationship future, integrity, and satisfaction. These results were similar to those of the previous research of Weigel and Ballard-Reisch in 1999.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, the results of this study would lead one to believe that marriages are more likely to have high levels of commitment communication during the early and later years of the marriage than during the mid level marriage. More research needs to be done to determine the ramifications of the results. More research would need to be done to study if this curvilinear pattern (being low during mid level marriages) could account for the divorce rates during these years.

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- [1] Adams, J. M., & Jones, W. H. (Eds.). (1999). *Handbook of Interpersonal Commitment and Relationship Stability*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing.
- [2] Weigel, Daniel J., & Ballard-Reisch, D. S. (1999). How couples maintain marriages: a closer look at self and spouse influences upon the use of maintenance behaviors in marriages. *Family Relations*, 48.3, 263-270.