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Marital stress and tension: Understanding the root causes and consequences

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Abstract

Marriages are often characterized by their positive and negative features in terms of whether they elicit feelings of satisfaction and happiness or conflict and negativity. Although research has examined the development of marital happiness, less is known about the development of negativity among married couples. We examined how marital tension (i.e., feelings of tension, resentment, irritation) develops within couples over time and whether marital tension has unique implications for divorce. Specifically, we examined marital tension among husbands and wives within the same couples from the first to the sixteenth year of marriage, as well as links between marital tension and divorce. Participants included 355 couples assessed in years 1, 2, 3, 4, 7 and 16 of marriage. Multilevel models revealed that wives reported greater marital tension than husbands. Marital tension increased over time among both husbands and wives, with a greater increase among husbands. Couples were more likely to divorce when wives reported higher marital tension, a greater increase in marital tension, and greater cumulative marital tension. Findings are consistent with the emergent distress model of marriage, but indicate that despite the greater increases in marital tension among husbands, wives' increased marital tension over the course of marriage is more consistently associated with divorce.

Keywords: marriage, tension, longitudinal, divorce, trajectories

Introduction

Marriages are often characterized by their positive and negative features in terms of whether they elicit feelings of satisfaction and happiness or conflict and negativity (Bookwala, 2016; Fincham) [8]. It is well established in the marital literature that couples experience changes in their marital happiness over time (Birditt, Hope, Brown, & Orbuch, 2012) [4]. There is much less known about the development of negative aspects of the marital relationship. Longitudinal studies of married individuals have been inconclusive, showing evidence of both stability over time (Kamp Dush & Taylor, 2012) as well as increased negativity (Birditt, Jackey, & Antonucci, 2009) [5]. The research to date has focused on married individuals rather than married couples. Thus, little is known about how negativity varies between husbands and wives and whether its development varies between individuals in the same marital relationship.

It is important to understand the development of negative aspects of the marital tie within married couples as negative aspects of relationships may not exhibit the same patterns of development as marital happiness. In fact, there is reason to believe that negative aspects of relationships may be more important for marital longevity (i.e., length of marriage) than happiness. The present study examined marital tension over 16 years and whether the development of marital tension for husbands and wives differentially predicted marital longevity.

Marital Tension

Positive and negative aspects of relationships are not simply opposite ends of the same continuum. People can have simultaneously positive and negative feelings for one another. Negative aspects of relationships also tend to be more highly associated with marital longevity as well as with psychological and physical well-being than do the positive aspects of relationships. Specifically, marital tension captures overall feelings of negativity in marriage. Marital tension includes negative emotions such as feeling tense, resentful, and irritated about the marital relationship. These emotions occur as a result of irritations,

disappointment, disagreements, and conflict in marriage. It is a broader construct than marital conflict, which is defined as overt arguments. Marital tension is also distinct from the particular types of conflict strategies that couples use. For example, one couple may yell and scream at one another during a marital disagreement, whereas another may calmly discuss problems yet both couples could experience high levels of marital tension.

Models of marital tension over time

Developmental models of marital quality vary in terms of whether they predict stability, declines or improvements in marital quality over time. We extend these models and apply them in our examination of the development of marital tension. Drawing from the enduring dynamics, emergent distress, disillusionment, and accommodation models of marital development, we describe how marital tension may develop and change from the newlywed to the middle years of marriage. We consider each perspective and their predictions concerning the course of marriage and divorce below.

Enduring dynamics model: Stability over time

The enduring dynamics model (Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000) ^[11] suggests that marital quality is relatively stable over time. The model posits that certain interpersonal characteristics and patterns established during courtship are maintained throughout the course of marriage. The presumption is that partners are aware of each other's positive and negative qualities, including shortcomings, prior to marriage and that many couples marry despite being aware of their incompatibilities. Thus, according to this model, marital tension will be stable over time.

Emergent distress and disillusionment models: Increased tensions over time

Unlike the enduring dynamics model, the emergent distress and the disillusionment models posit that interpersonal characteristics and patterns among newlyweds are not predictive of marital outcomes. Rather, most newlyweds begin their marriage very happy and view their partner as having predominantly positive qualities with very few negative ones, but then either experience increasing emergent distress or otherwise become disillusioned with their partner over time.

The emergent distress model presumes that the ways in which couples resolve their differences are the key factors in determining marital success versus failure. Couples who do not create a constructive problem-solving context may express more negativity. After some time, couples experience a rise in negativity that corrodes their relationship (Bradbury, Cohan, & Karney, 1998) ^[9]. The increase in marital conflict and negative behavior contributes to marital dissatisfaction and divorce. The disillusionment model also predicts increased marital tension but due to a different developmental mechanism. According to the disillusionment model, couples are overly happy in the early years of marriage due to idealized notions of one another and high unrealistic expectations. Couples may present themselves more positively in the early years. As couples get to know one another better and are less able to maintain a happy façade, conflict and marital tension increase over time. Couples may also have unrealistically high expectations at the beginning of the relationship, which

leads to disappointment and frustration over time when faced with the stresses of daily life. Thus, according to these models, marital tension will increase with time.

The accommodation model: Decreased or curvilinear marital tension over time

Similar to the emergent distress and disillusionment models, the accommodation model presumes that initial marital patterns do not necessarily determine marital outcomes. The accommodation model differs, however, in that it presumes newlyweds can experience and accommodate to early marital problems. These initial marital problems may cause difficulties and disappointments, but partners learn to adapt their expectations and accommodate to each other, which allows for a better marital relationship. By learning to overcome marital problems, couples are able to sustain a happy marriage. According to the accommodation model, marital tension will decrease over time or increase briefly followed by a decrease (curvilinear).

Longitudinal Patterns of Negative Dimensions of Marriage

Researchers examining the longitudinal course of marriage have examined married individuals rather than couples and vary in terms of how they assess negative aspects of marriage. In addition, most studies examined overt conflict, which is a distinct construct from general underlying marital tension. Longitudinal studies of self-reported conflict revealed inconsistent findings with regard to the average change over time among married individuals. Some studies have found stability in self-reported conflict among married individuals over time. Kamp Dush and Taylor (2012) examined individuals' self-reports of marital conflict over 20 years ("How often do you disagree with your spouse?"). They found three marital conflict trajectories – low, medium, and high – that were mostly stable over time. In contrast, other studies of married individuals found increased self-reported, overt marital disagreements over time. James (2015) examined the development of marital conflict among wives aged 35 and older, such as arguing with husbands over chores and responsibilities, children, money, showing affection, religion, leisure, drinking, other women, his relatives, and her relatives. He identified three trajectories including a low, moderate, and high group, which varied significantly in their initial levels of conflict. All groups showed increased conflict over the first 10 years of marriage followed by declines.

Few studies examined marital tension indicators or made the distinction between overt arguments and underlying marital tension. Birditt *et al.* (2009) ^[5] found that negative marital quality (i.e., the extent to which spouse gets on nerves and makes too many demands) increased over time. Similarly, Umberson *et al.* (2006) examined disagreements and marital tension over time and found increases over 8 years of marriage among married individuals. Whereas studies reported inconsistent findings on whether overt disagreement and conflict are stable or increase over time, the limited studies on marital tension-related concepts suggest that marital tension increases over time. In addition, the studies presented analyzed data from individuals who were married. We argue that this is equivalent to examining unrelated mothers and children to study the development of the mother-child attachment relationship. It is particularly important to examine husbands and wives within couples

because research suggests that wives report lower marital satisfaction, greater marital tension and are more distressed by relationship problems. They are also more affected by their husbands' stress, health problems, and opinions of the relationship than the reverse. However, studies have yet to consider whether there are variations in the development of marital tension between husbands and wives within couples.

Marital Tension and Divorce

Greater negativity (e.g., more hostility, destructive conflict strategies), in the first years of marriage predicts increased marital instability and divorce in studies examining the newlywed years through middle age (Birditt, Brown, Orbuch, & McIlvane, 2010)^[3]. Nevertheless, we know little about the effects of the development of marital tension on the risk of divorce. Changes in marital tension may have greater implications for marital longevity than positive aspects of marriage, such as happiness and satisfaction, because negative aspects of relationships tend to be more highly associated with well-being than positive aspects of relationships.

Theories of marital development can be used to make differential predictions regarding the development of marital tension and divorce. The enduring dynamics model suggests that high levels of marital tension in the first year of marriage will predict increased likelihood of divorce. In contrast, the emergent distress and disillusionment models suggest that increasing marital tension over time predicts increased likelihood of divorce, whereas the accommodation model predicts that the inability to reduce marital tensions by accommodating to their spouse would predict greater likelihood of divorce. These models suggest that the development of marital tension may have distinct effects on marital longevity beyond the level of marital tension in the first year of marriage. Based on these different models of marriage, marital tension needs to be examined in several different ways as marital tension in the newlywed years may be important in setting the tone of the marriage, and yet changes in marital tension may be more indicative of relationship quality and longevity. This study uses unique longitudinal couple data to examine the importance of marital tension for marital longevity (i.e., the length of marriage). We assessed different mechanisms of dissolution with regards to marital tension: (1) tension in the first year of marriage, (2) average marital tension over time, (3) marital tension in the most recent wave, (4) change in marital tension from the previous wave, and (5) cumulative marital tension. Each of the five mechanisms of dissolution focused on a different explanatory contribution of tension to the longevity of marriage.

Tension in the first year of marriage and average marital tension over time addresses the enduring dynamics model, which suggests that couples have enduring proclivities to tension or irritations that are destructive to marriage long-term. Marital tension in the most recent wave, change in marital tension from the previous wave, and cumulative marital tension scores were used to test the emergent distress and disillusionment models, which suggest that rising tensions over the course of a relationship may be responsible for divorce, as well as the accommodation model, which suggests that the inability to decrease tension would predict whether couples divorce.

Finally, there may be distinct effects of husband and wife perceptions of marital tension over time on marital

longevity. Wives reports of marital tension may be more highly predictive of divorce as wives are more likely to initiate divorce than are husbands (Amato, & Previti, 2003)^[2]. Further, wives are more likely to use destructive conflict strategies than are husbands which is predictive of divorce (Birditt *et al.*, 2010)^[3].

Present Study

This study moved beyond the present literature by examining marital tension among married couples over 16 years of marriage and the implications of the development of marital tension for marital longevity. We addressed the following hypotheses:

H1) Because wives often report greater negative marital quality than husbands (Birditt *et al.*, 2015)^[6] we predicted that wives would report greater marital tension than husbands.

H2) Marital tension would increase among both husbands and wives. We also predicted that there would be a greater increase in marital tension among wives than among husbands because wives tend to report greater marital tension.

H3) Consistent with the emergent distress and disillusionment models, increasing marital tension would predict marital longevity to a greater degree than marital tension in the first year of marriage.

H4) Because wives are more likely to initiate divorce and are more likely to use destructive conflict strategies in response to conflict (Amato, & Previti, 2003; Birditt *et al.*, 2010)^[2, 3], we predicted that wives' reports of marital tension would be more predictive of marital longevity than would husbands' reports of marital tension.

The present study also controlled for several socio-demographic characteristics which have been identified as predictors of marital quality and divorce, including race^[10], socioeconomic status (Conger & Conger, 2002)^[12], number of months cohabited, whether they have premarital children, and how old they were when they married. Models predicting divorce also controlled for marital happiness in order to examine whether marital tension has distinct effects on marital longevity beyond marital happiness.

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