



Research Article

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Does Marital Social Desirability Mean the Same Thing at Different Levels of Marital Satisfaction? A Further Exploratory Analysis from a Sample of U.S. Military Officers Training at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

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Abstract

As a continuation of previous research on correlates of marital social desirability responding among a sample of mostly Army military officers attending training at Fort Leavenworth Kansas, this study looked into the extent of marital social desirability being reported and associations between numerous independent variables with it. The strongest association occurred between high levels of military stress and lower levels of reported marital social desirability, even at higher levels of marital satisfaction. High levels of stress, even in a happy marriage, may serve as a reality check against reporting one's marital situation as "ideal". Less strong and less consistent was an association between having more children and reports of higher levels of marital social desirability, possibly stronger at lower levels of marital satisfaction, in which children may be compensating for a less than happy marriage. However, those in distressed marriages seldom reported high levels of marital social desirability. An interesting significant interaction effect was found between intrinsic religiosity and marital satisfaction for predicting marital social desirability. Due to the exploratory nature of this study and several study limitations, the results of this study are most important for suggesting future avenues for research with more general samples of the public with wider ranges of education, socioeconomic status, and levels of marital satisfaction.

Keywords: Marital social desirability, Marital conventionalization, Marital satisfaction, Validity, measurement, Kansas marital satisfaction scale, Military families

Introduction

Family social scientists have long recognized that some respondents will report that their marriages are impossibly perfect, at least according to the values of such researchers [for a review, 1]. However, no one seems to be sure what such respondents mean when they respond to marital social desirability questions. This research gap creates uncertainty about whether adjustments for marital social desirability are useful or even if they should be attempted until we understand what it means to our respondents. A recent research report [1] found a significant nonlinear relationship be

tween a single-item measure of marital social desirability and the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale [2], a result that raised the possibility that whatever marital social desirability may mean, it may differ across various levels of marital satisfaction. More specifically, if one were to predict reports of marital social desirability as a function of independent variables, the association of the independent variables might be weaker or stronger for different levels of marital satisfaction or compared to results for an entire sample of all marital satisfaction scores. Indeed, several scholars have concluded that



attempts to measure marital social desirability are merely weak measures of marital adjustment [3-7].

Research Questions

- a. **RQ1.** How would the percentage of reports of marital social desirability vary as a function of marital [8] satisfaction? How often would participants report strong agreement with the idea that their marriage was ideal or perfect? Would the results confirm that “marital satisfaction can exist without idealization, but marital idealization does not exist without satisfaction” [8: 449]?
- b. **RQ 2.** What independent variables would yield significant associations with marital social desirability within an entire sample, with (2a) and without (2b) including marital satisfaction as one of the independent variables?
- c. **RQ 3.** How would the same variables, absent marital satisfaction, yield significant associations with marital social desirability across different levels of marital satisfaction? To what extent would those associations differ across the different levels of marital satisfaction?

Methods

Sample

Data were obtained from a sample of military officers attending Command and General Staff College (later Intermediate Learning Education, ILE), both Army officers and officers from other branches and/or components. How the samples were obtained and their descriptions have been reported elsewhere [1,9].

Measurement

Marital satisfaction was measured by the three-item Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale, using individual items with five response categories from very dissatisfied to very satisfied, with scores ranging from 3 to 15, with higher scores representing higher levels of self-reported marital satisfaction. Marital social desirability was measured by a single item with five response categories from strongly disagree to strongly agree, a Likert type response pattern

recommended [10]. Demographic variables included number of children, age, level of education, reporting very stressed the year before, sought God’s love and care, non-Army service vs. Army, intrinsic religiosity, and a scale of practical religiosity.

Analyses

Chi-square analysis (crosstabs in SPSS version 31.0) was used to expose the association between levels of marital satisfaction and marital social desirability. Ordinary least squares regression was used to predict marital social desirability from independent variables. For RQ 2a, the only variables significant in the regression equations (direct entry and backwards elimination) including all variables were number of children, marital satisfaction, and stressed; a final regression was calculated using only those three variables to maximize sample size in the analysis. For RQ 2b, the only significant variables were number of children and stressed; a final regression was calculated using only those two variables. For RQ3, the same independent variables (except marital satisfaction) were used to predict marital social desirability for three levels of marital satisfaction (scores of 3-11, 12-14, and 15).

Results

- a. **Research Question 1.** Table 1 presents the results of a cross-tabulation between marital satisfaction and marital social desirability scores. A chi-square test ($df = 48$) value of 260.08 was significant ($p < .001$). Several observations can be noted. Over 56% of the sample reported the highest possible marital satisfaction score. While over 57% of the sample reported high levels of marital social desirability, only 15.1% reported the highest level of marital social desirability; even among those who reported the highest level of marital satisfaction, only 25.4% reported the highest level of marital social desirability. Over 81% of the marriages reporting a distressed level of marital satisfaction reported that they disagreed with the question of their marriage being ideal. The three respondents who reported distressed marriages but also ideal or near ideal may be anomalies; this type of response might be worth studying in a larger sample (Table 1).

Table 1: Crosstabulation of Marital Social Desirability Scores Relative to Marital Satisfaction Scores.

Marital Social Desirability (Marriage is Ideal)					
	Strongly Disagree/Disagree	Mixed	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Marital Satisfaction					
15	8	17	81	36	142 (56.3%)
14	5	6	9	1	21 (8.3%)
13	2	5	5	0	12 (4.8%)
12	14	10	10	0	34 (13.5%)
3-11	35	5	2	1	43 (17.1%)
Total	64 (25.4%)	43 (17.1%)	107 (42.5%)	38 (15.1%)	252 (100%)

Note*: Marital satisfaction scale scores ranged from 3 to 15; marital social desirability scores ranged from 1 to 5. The “bump” in scores at 15 and 12 occurs as, with three items, scores tend to cluster at 3 (7), 6 (10), 9 (2), 12 (34), and 15 (142) compared to 57 cases for the eight other possible scores for marital satisfaction. The maximum score for marital satisfaction was 15; scores below 12 probably represented distressed marriages. Due to rounding percentages may not add up exactly.

- b. Research Question 2a.** Predicting marital social desirability from marital satisfaction ($\beta = .543$, $p < .001$), high stress ($\beta = -.266$, $p < .001$), and number of children ($\beta = .108$, $p < .06$) yielded $F(3, 237) = 91.35$ ($p < .001$) with an adjusted $R^2 = 0.530$.
- c. Research Question 2b.** Predicting marital social desirability from high stress ($\beta = -.550$, $p < .001$) and number of children ($\beta = .142$, $p < .01$) yielded $F(2, 258) = 61.14$ ($p < .001$) with an adjusted $R^2 = 0.316$.
- d. Research Question 3a.** None of the independent variables used to predict marital social desirability were found to be significant in the direct entry and backwards elimination methods; the zero-order correlation between marital social desirability and number of children was $r = .264$ ($N = 43$, $p < .09$) for those scoring below 12 on marital satisfaction.
- e. Research Question 3b.** The only three variables that were statistically significant for both the direct entry and backwards elimination regression equations were number of children, stressed, and intrinsic religiosity. However, upon running a direct entry regression for only those three variables predicting marital social desirability (which increased the sample size for the analysis from 50 to 60), only two variables remained significant, stressed ($\beta = -.291$, $p < .05$), intrinsic religiosity ($\beta = -.300$, $p < .05$), with number of children ($\beta = .159$, $p = .204$) not significant.
- f. Research Question 3c.** The only two variables that were statistically significant for both regression equations were stressed and intrinsic religiosity; when a regression was run for only those two variables, $F(2, 131) = 12.42$ ($p < .001$), with an adjusted $R^2 = .147$, with stressed ($\beta = .322$, $p < .001$) and intrinsic religiosity ($\beta = .222$, $p < .01$) significant. There was a trend for other military branches to report higher levels of marital social desirability when that variable was added to the other two ($\beta = .164$, $p = .074$), increasing the adjusted $R^2 = .160$. Predicting marital social desirability with medium (12-14) vs. high (15) marital satisfaction and with intrinsic religiosity (3 – 15) and their interaction term, using analysis of variance, the interaction effect was significant with $F(8, 168) = 2.33$ ($p = .021$).

Discussion

With respect to our first research question, it was expected that marital social desirability and marital satisfaction would vary together, which they did ($p < .001$). A closer look at the results found that even among the most satisfied respondents, only 25% reported the highest level of marital social desirability while only 15% of the entire sample did so. In this sample, marital social desirability, while not uncommon, was perhaps less of a factor than in previous studies. Most distressed marriage respondents disavowed high levels of marital social desirability; for them, marital social desirability questions may be irrelevant [8], with little temptation to answer them favorably, though a few did so. For the second research question whether marital satisfaction was or was not used as a control variable, respondents with more children reported higher levels of

marital social desirability while those with more recent high stress reported lower levels of marital social desirability. Even if one's marriage is deemed highly satisfied, it may be a challenge to think of it as "ideal" when recent stress levels have been very high. Having more children may, to some extent, compensate for a less satisfied marriage, even to the point of seeing it as closer to an "ideal" than one might otherwise view it (without children).

The third research question involved marital social desirability at three different levels of marital satisfaction (low, medium, high). Only for the two lower levels was there a trend for number of children to be associated with higher reports of marital social desirability, which may suggest that the finding of that association with Research Question 2 may be found more among the less satisfied. Among the more stressed (medium/high) high levels of stress were related to lower levels of reported marital social desirability. This result suggests that even for higher levels of marital satisfaction, an experience of high stress may reduce tendencies to report having an ideal marriage. The results for intrinsic religiosity were the most unexpected finding of this study, a significant interaction effect with level of marital satisfaction such that at medium levels of marital satisfaction, higher levels of intrinsic religiosity were associated with lower reports of marital social desirability while at high(est) levels of marital satisfaction, higher levels of intrinsic religiosity were associated with higher reports of marital social desirability. A three-way interaction between intrinsic religiosity, stress, and marital satisfaction was not tested, but it may be that a combination of low stress, high marital satisfaction, and a high value placed on religion may lead respondents to view their situation as relatively ideal whereas a combination of high stress and moderate marital satisfaction may lead more religious respondents to feel that the most honest report is to deny their situation as being ideal or perfect.

This study features several limitations, as discussed elsewhere [9]. The measure of marital social desirability uses only a single item rather than a scale. The sample is narrow – including only mid-career military officers. The survey occurred over two decades ago. The response rate was low, approximately 20%. Over 56% of the respondents reported the highest possible marital satisfaction score, which may reflect the nature of the sample – highly educated, well-paid mid-level managers with excellent benefits who could afford divorce in the event of an unhappy marriage (i.e. unhappy marriages may have already been selected out of the population of these officers). Results from samples with a wider spread of marital satisfaction scores might differ. At the same time, relatively few respondents reported the highest level of marital social desirability (15.1%); even among those with the highest level of marital satisfaction only 25.4% reported the highest level of marital social desirability. Again, results might differ among samples with a wider distribution of marital social desirability scores. It is possible that the high levels of education among the sample alerted the respondents to the possible "trick" nature of the marital social desirability question, rendering them cautious about providing a maximum response; however, those with higher levels of education did not seem to report lower levels of marital social desirability.

Implications for Future Research

Qualitative research is needed to explore why some respondents, especially at higher levels of marital satisfaction may report high levels of marital social desirability. How do they interpret marital social desirability questions? What do their answers mean in their own eyes? Do those at lower levels of marital satisfaction view marital social desirability questions as irrelevant or nonsensical? Quantitative research on marital social desirability faces new challenges. Because of possible nonlinear patterns between marital social desirability and marital satisfaction, heteroskedasticity of variance may complicate statistical modeling that includes both of those variables together. Using marital social desirability as a control variable when qualitative research is lacking on what respondents mean by it- in their eyes, not the researcher's- can be questioned in terms of validity. Design approaches for controlling marital social desirability may be too harsh since few respondents report the highest levels of it, even at high levels of marital satisfaction. Inadvertently, patterns of low marital satisfaction combined with high levels of marital social desirability may indicate invalid participant responses from lack of attention, fatigue, or a thought that silly questions should get silly answers. Elimination of such combinations may be needed as much as the elimination of the scores involved with peak levels of marital social desirability. Future research may need to measure and include stress levels, number of children, and intrinsic religiosity when analyzing when or how respondents are reporting different levels of marital social desirability. Various alternatives available for dealing with the social desirability problem need to be tested and compared for their effectiveness [11]. In particular, the Idealistic Distortion Scale, a measure of marital social desirability that has received some criticism [3] might be tested in ways similar to this study to assess its validity. In addition, future research might investigate whether there is a need for parental or family life satisfaction measures of social desirability [12].

Conclusion

Surprisingly, few participants went "all in" on the highest possible levels of marital social desirability, even at the highest levels of marital satisfaction, which may indicate a smaller role for marital social desirability in certain populations than might have been expected. Among those lower on marital satisfaction, almost none reported high levels of marital social desirability. At low levels of marital satisfaction, social desirability questions may not make much sense to most respondents (What? My marriage ideal? Are you kidding?). Having more children seemed to increase reports of higher marital social desirability, especially among those who were less satisfied with their marriages, while having high levels of stress in one's life seemed to decrease reports of higher marital social desirability, especially among those who were more satisfied with their marriages. Children may compensate in part for a less

than satisfactory marriage. High stress levels may serve as a reality check even for those who are satisfied with their marriage, reducing their sense that their current situation is "ideal". The apparent association between intrinsic religiosity and marital social desirability changed significantly between medium and high levels of marital satisfaction in this sample.

Acknowledgement

None.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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