

THE ROLE OF PERSONAL CONSTRUCTS IN MARITAL SATISFACTION OF SPOUSES

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ABSTRACT

The present study is aimed at exploring the impact of personal constructs on the level of marital satisfaction of couples. A sample of 80 married couples (40 couples having similar constructs and 40 couples having different personal constructs) was taken from different cities i.e. Multan, Lahore, Rawalpindi, and Islamabad. Index of Marital Satisfaction (Hudson, 1982) and The Role Construct Repertory Test (Kelly, 1955) were used to collect the data. Results showed that couples who have the same personal constructs have more marital satisfaction as compared to couples with different personal constructs. However, no significant gender differences were found in couples which showed that in couples of similar personal constructs, males and females have equal marital satisfaction. The findings also showed that age of couples does not play any significant role in marital satisfaction of married couples of similar personal constructs.

INTRODUCTION

Individuals have unique mental set to predict and anticipate events. In this way every common man behaves like a scientist. He/she keeps on observing evolving theoretical formulation as how the environment is working in order to predict and anticipate the events. Based on these assumptions Kelly (1955) evolved his theory and this is generally called the “personal construct theory”. Simply this theory states that every individual will evolve his own personal perception of himself, other individuals and situations surrounding them. Personal construct psychology provides us a model for individuals to understand themselves and also for us to study those factors that show their ability to solve their own problems.

Our perception of the world is always subject to change and this ability to change one’s assumption is termed as constructive alternativism. People cognize their world from different perspectives. One observation may be quite right in one situation but it can change with the changing situations. The world that people experience is essentially produced and created by their own self. The term templates can be used to describe the concept of personal construct. Construct is basically a term used to describe individual’s perception of reality. This concept can be compared with the natural scientists’ concept of a theory. Scientific theories are developed out of observation and experimentation and the social life concepts are evolved out of molecular conjunctions. With more experience they are stabilized and help us to interpret the reality. These templates or construct alone determine our behavior. A construct must have both a comparison and a contrast, both of which must occur within the same context. Constructs can be flexible in order to assimilate new ideas or they may be restricted to be more precise. Individuals most of the time act like scientists, out of their day to day experience; they observe, hypothesize, draw certain results, and also work with predictions (Kelly, 1955).

These systems of constructs or templates are transformed into theories. Every construct has two extreme points like good-bad and people have tendency to categories individual at either extreme or somewhere in the middle of the extreme. People’s cognitive set up is full of such construct out of which some may be conscious or some may be unconscious. For instance, working with these constructs an individual will

be judged as good or bad or somewhere between these two extremes (Kelly, 1963).

People try to interpret the world through these personal constructs and if they want to understand a person then they have to understand his system of essential constructs. When they are talking about essential constructs it means strong and unchangeable beliefs that a person has evolved to understand him/her self or situations. For instance, the child comes to know 'if I cry or shout mother will hug me' and in this way people keep on revising their theories as they grow up. These theories include hasty generalization as well so that people are able to control the behaviors of others and also to impose their theories upon other people.

As the personal constructs of the people determine their behavior, one of the most vital roles of one's is marital role. Personal construct can direct the behaviors of spouses in marital relationship. In most cultures, marriage is seen as a normal and desirable type of existence for adults. However the process by which marriages are contracted and the criteria for mate selection vary widely across cultures. The word marriage may be taken to denote the action, contract, formality, or ceremony by which the conjugal union is formed. Marriage brings mutual rights and duties to the partners (Gupta, 1991).the conjugal union is formed. Marriage brings mutual rights and duties to the partners (Gupta, 1991).

A marital relationship is affected and its future can be predicted by personal constructs of both partners. Therefore, marital satisfaction is determined by how much the contents of each spouse's constructs are similar. In a marital relationship the personal construct system of one spouse affects the personal construct system of other one spouse. The way the partners use to interpret their behaviors and behaviors of others is important for consensus and agreements in many of the issues related to marital life (Crawford, 2002).

Marital Satisfaction; a partner's personal experience of satisfaction or happiness with a marital relationship differs for everyone due to the dissimilarity of the personal constructs (Wolf, 1996). According to Zuo (1992) marital satisfaction is the subjective feeling of happiness, satisfaction and pleasure that married couples experience when they have similar templates to view and understand the world. All marriages are aimed at happiness in one way or another; most couples that marry are filled up with expectations. Some of the expectations will be realistic while others are unrealistic.

This is due to the complex nature of marriage and each individual is as complex as a universe. Therefore, in marriage two universes come together. Happiness, satisfaction and fulfillment of expectations are possible only by mutual adjustments and matched personal constructs that lead to a common concept of marriage and this concept of marriage is a basic element of many marital adjustments and satisfactions (Kurdek 1988).

Maximum involvement gives the couple a sense of satisfaction and confidence in the in the relationship. To have maximum involvement, the couple has to grow in their understanding of each other and adjust in different factors that affect the core of the family life (Bradbury, Fincham & Beach, 2000). Intimacy or feelings of togetherness, and closeness in loving relationships come when both partners have similar way to cognize their world. An intimate relationship provides warmth and emotional support to the partners. The lack of intimacy is one of the major reasons why couples break up their marriages (Sternberg & Barnes, 1988).

It has been continuously observed that the ways in which marital partners perceive and interpret each other is likely to determine the quality of relationship (Epstein & Baucom, 2002). Baucom, Epstein, Sayers, and Sher (1989) have mentioned five types of perception that may affect partner's psychological responses to each other. These are as under

1. Selective perception: when the couples interact with each other they are likely to perceive certain aspects of their relationships
2. Attribution styles: attribution style refers to the way partners explain the causes of each other behaviors. Whenever there is something wrong with their relationship they work with either fundamental attribution error or self serving bias.
3. Expectancies: in partner relationship the expectancy refers to the likelihood of certain events that may occur in a relationship.
4. Schemas: schemas refers to the set of beliefs that partners have about each other and about the nature of their own relationships.

5. Should schemas: this refers to the standards that a partner expects from each other and the nature of ideal relationship.

All these types of cognitions are significant impact upon the nature of relationship but recent research indicates that attribution styles and should schemas play important roles in determining the quality of partners' relationships and the ways of their communication either positive or negative (Epstein & Baucom, 2002; Fincham & Beach, 1999). Karney & Davila (1995) also explored the relationships between individuals' personal construct systems regarding marital relationships and their love styles. Results revealed that the personal construct approach offers rich insight into aspects of intimate, satisfaction, and marital relationships.

The present research aimed at looking into the relationship between personal construct of spouses and their marital satisfaction in Pakistani cultural context. This study was an extension of knowing the role of personal constructs in couple's relationships. On the basis of existing literature following hypotheses were formulated;

1. Couples with similar personal constructs would have more marital satisfaction than the couples with different personal constructs.
2. Female partners of the couples having similar personal constructs, would report more marital satisfaction as compared to the male partners of the couples having similar personal constructs
3. Couples with similar constructs in different age groups would show different levels of satisfaction with their marriages.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS

The sample comprised of 180 married couples. The groups of similar personal construct and different personal construct were categorized by mean +_ 1 SD. Finally, a sample of 160 couples (55 couples having same personal constructs and 55 with different personal constructs) was selected through non-probability purposive convenient sampling technique, from four major cities of Pakistan i.e., Multan, Lahore, Rawalpindi,

and Islamabad. The age range of this sample was between 20 – 60 years ($M = 33.24$, $SD = 9.42$). All the respondents belonged to middle socio-economic class.

INSTRUMENTS

1. The Role Construct Repertory Test

This is an abbreviated version of Kelly's (1955) REP Test (the Minimum Context Form). The REP Test provides a quick idea of the constructs people use to organize information about the other people they know and meet. People may want to compare their responses with those of other test takers. No doubt they will find a few overlapping constructs, but also may have thought of. Of course, these differences in personal constructs represent differences in personality that should translate into individual differences in behaviors. The procedure of test administration is carried out in two phases:

- They were requested to write down the name of 12 people along with the prescribed roles in the form of a list. Although, a person may fit more than one category, they were required to complete a list of 12 different people.
- Next, they had to take three of these people at a time, as indicated by the numbers in another list, and then describe in what important way two of them are alike but different from the third. They had to put a word or phrase describing the two alike people in the Construct list and description of the remaining person in the Contrast list.

2. Index of Marital Satisfaction

The Index of Marital Satisfaction (IMS) by Hudson (1982) is designed to measure the degree, severity, or magnitude of a problem a spouse has in the marital relationship. IMS is structured as a 25-item wherein each item is scored according to the following five categories: 1 = rarely or none of the time; 2 = a little of the time; 3 = some of the time 4 = a good part of the time; and 5 = most or all of the time. The first step in scoring is to reverse-score each of the positively worded items so that an item score of 5 becomes 1, 4 becomes 2, 2 becomes 4, 1 becomes 5, and a score of 3 remains unchanged. The reverse score items in IMS are 1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 11, 13, 16, 17,

19, 20, 21 and 23. After reverse-scoring the appropriate items on the scale and then denoting the item responses as Y , the total score (S) is computed for scale as $S = Y - 25$. IMS has a clinical cutting score of 30. It is generally found that persons who obtain a score above 30 have a clinically significant problem in the area being measured. While those who score below 30 are generally free of such problems. Alpha Reliability Coefficients of Urdu-Version of this scale is 0.62 and split-half reliability is 0.89.

PROCEDURE

In this study 180 couples were contacted after obtaining their consent. The measures i.e., the Role Construct Repertory Test and the Index of Marital Satisfaction were distributed individually to all the respondents. It was made clear to the respondents that the questionnaires were to be filled out anonymously and their responses would be kept confidential. Respondents were requested to fill up the questionnaires according to the instructions written on it. Of this sample, 160 couples were selected and were categorized into two groups i.e., couples having similar patterns of personal constructs and couples who differ in their personal construct system. Analysis of data was performed using SPSS.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics, t -test, and ANOVA were computed in order to test the hypotheses formulated in the present study.

Table 1

Difference in Marital Satisfaction of two groups of Couples with Similar (N =80) & Different Personal Constructs (N =80)

| Groups | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>t</i> |
|---------------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Couples of Similar Constructs | 40.09 | 5.23 | 1.90* |
| Couples of Different Constructs | 27.78 | 4.53 | |

$df = 158$, $*p < 0.05$

Table 2

Gender Difference in Marital Satisfaction of the couples with Similar Personal Constructs (N =80, 80)

| Groups | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>t</i> |
|---------|----------|-----------|----------|
| Feamles | 42.12 | 6.11 | 1.21 |
| Males | 38.06 | 5.53 | |

$df = 158$

Table 3

One Way Analysis of Variance of Age of Couples as a Function of Marital Satisfaction

| Source of Variation | <i>SS</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>MS</i> | <i>F</i> |
|---------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| Between Groups | 4995.02 | 4 | 1248.75 | 4.43 |
| Within Groups | 111387.27 | 155 | 281.99 | |
| Total | 116382.29 | 159 | | |

Table I reveals that the two groups of couples having same and different personal constructs are significantly different. Couples with same personal constructs have more marital satisfaction as compared to couples who have different personal constructs ($t = 1.90, p < 0.05$). The results in Table 2 indicate that the difference is not significant in the level of marital satisfaction between male and female partners of the couples with similar personal constructs. Results suggest that in couples with similar personal constructs both males and females have equal marital satisfaction. Table 3 reveals that the age of the couples does not have a significant impact on marital satisfaction of couples.

DISCUSSION

Overall the results indicate that those couples who have the same personal constructs have more marital satisfaction comparatively than those who differ in terms of their personal constructs. These findings suggest that married couples with same personal constructs show more marital satisfaction because of same thinking style and same perceiving style of the world and events.

It is quite clear that person's construct system is basically a subjective phenomenon. It can not be evaluated objectively. In the realm of human feelings, references and preferences objectivity is essentially meaningless. When two people meet whose personal construct system is different they are likely to misjudge each other. In their marital relationship they can not understand each other's point of view and get frustrated, and disgusted with each other. As a matter of facts it is a case of two incompatible person's construct system. Two different construct systems do not mean that they can not bring change in their system. The first thing that the partner must accept that due to different experiences and different life events they perceive different things as more important but if they are willing to bring some change in their personal construct systems that is likely to bring positive change in the life and the level of their marital satisfaction will increase as they try to bridge the gap between their respective schemas.

Cultural history and social systems in Pakistan seem to influence the development of personal constructs and its impact on marital satisfaction of the married couples. One interesting result of the current study is associated with the investigation of the gender differences in marital satisfaction of a married couple having the same constructs. The results also show that male and female partners of the married couples are equally satisfied with their marriages. These results are similar to Kelly's (1955) findings who stated that couples with same personal constructs keep agreed approach to deal with conflicting situations, which may save the family from the adverse effects of actions, which could lead to conflict and separation. Couples with different constructs, on the other hand, face conflicting situations in daily life in either minor or big problems which lead them to be less satisfied with their marriages and which show negative effects on the family.

As cognitive theories explain behavior in relationships as associated with the belief system, learned expectations, attribution style and ways in which an individual's relationship experiences may be affected by these factors. The spouses may perceive their partner's behaviors as positive and negative regardless of the degree of possessiveness judged by trained outside observers (Beck, 1983).

According to Benokraitis (2005), a successful or satisfied marriage may be defined as a union in which the attitude and acts of husband and wife are in agreement on the main family issues, such as handling the family finance and dealing in-laws, where they have come to an agreement upon interests, objectives and values, where they have few or no more complaints about marriage. Theory of personal constructs (Kelly, 1955) is in favor of the findings of present study that states when constructs are challenged by others and different from others, the psychological states such as anxiety, tension, confusion, aggression, fear, and frustration occur. The results also indicate that age of the married couples did not play a significant role in the marital satisfaction of the married couples having same personal constructs. This can be inferred that the same personal constructs did play a significant role as a determinant of the marital satisfaction in married couples.

CONCLUSION

The present study may be considered a pioneering research in the area of personal constructs in relation to marital satisfaction in married couples. It sheds light on the importance of developing personal constructs in same ways focusing upon cultural values and preferences. Notwithstanding the limitations such as those mentioned below, the results revealed interesting cultural trends and perspectives from the Pakistani sample, married couples with the same personal constructs have more marital satisfaction than those who have different personal constructs. Both partners of a married couple show equal level of their satisfaction with marriages due to having the same pattern of constructs. Even age is not a significant factor for marital satisfaction when talking about personal constructs.

Limitations & Suggestions

This investigation has some limitations in that it relied on a convenience sample taken from the urban areas of Multan, Lahore, Rawalpindi and Islamabad, the findings therefore can not be generalized especially to individuals who have belonging to the rural areas totally different social background. The study may well be replicated in other settings exploring some more variables which could be associated with personal constructs and marital satisfaction e.g. number of siblings, educational level, and socio economic class.

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