The effect of intimate relationship length on the positive and negative qualities of the relationship for those 25-35 year olds in dual-earner relationships

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Abstract

Marriage and close intimate relationships are probably the most intense of all social relationships. Research indicates that individuals who commence an intimate relationship do so with an overly positive perception of their selected partner. The present study aimed to determine at what time in a relationship individuals begin to acknowledge both the negative as well as the positive qualities of their partner - to remove the “rose-coloured-glasses”; so to speak. Sixty-two individuals participated in the study, 30 males ($M=29.9, SD=3.1$) and 32 females ($M=28.5, SD=3.2$). Mean length of intimate relationship was 5.2 years for the sample, with 48.4% indicating a ‘married’ status for their relationship. A modified version of the Relationship Assessment Scale (Hendrick, 1988) and the Positive and Negative Qualities in Marriage Scale (Fincham & Linfield, 1997) were used to determine the satisfaction respondents had with their intimate relationship overall and the degree to which the positive and negative qualities of the intimate relationship were acknowledged as present in the relationship. Results indicate that those individuals currently in a relationship in excess of 3 years in length are significantly more likely to recognise the negative qualities of their intimate partner, but are not likely to assess the relationship in general as negative. Implications of the study’s finding are discussed and suggestions for further research are made.

Social activity is pivotal to an individual’s mental, physical and spiritual health. Research indicates that individuals who regularly engage in social activity have greater positive well-being (Myers, Sweeney & Witmer, 2000; Okun, Stock, Haring & Witmer, 1994). Marriage and close intimate relationships are probably the most intense of social relationships.

A large number of studies have shown that a positive marital union correlates positively with health and well-being (e.g., McCabe, Cummins & Romeo, 1996). An individual’s level of satisfaction with their intimate relationship is also a contributor to reported levels of trust and intimacy and the quality of communication between partners, and is a predictor of marriage longevity (Fincham & Linfield, 1997).

Contradictory research indicates that the link between relationship quality and well-being is increasingly tenuous with the institution of marriage waning and being replaced with alternative forms of co-operative partnerships (e.g., Cramer, 1993; Csikszentmihalyi, 1992; McCabe et al, 1996).

Family structure in Australia is changing with a changing population demographic. Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicates that Australian couples are getting married later and one in four couples are choosing not to get married, instead opting for an alternative de-facto marriage arrangement (ABS, 2002a). In the past 15 years there has also been a 10% increase in both men and women who indicate that they will never marry (ABS, 2002b). The relationship and family structure for younger Australians is increasingly disjointed: married, not married, de-facto or “other”.

Changing family and social structures and the increased pressure to develop and maintain social interaction outside of the environment of the traditional family may adversely affect the relative importance of an individuals’ relationship, especially for younger generations.

Increasingly, other commitments – such as work and career – have resulted in a necessity to work longer and more varied hours. For Australia’s younger generation the ability to positively meet all of their role commitments is increasingly challenged (Harmer, 2003).

If an individual’s intimate relationship is the most intense of social relationships, how is this relationship faring as a result of changing times? The current study was interested in exploring the relative importance of intimate relationships for Australia’s younger generations, and, for this cohort, when the relationship is at its most fragile.

Previous research suggests that individuals enter into an intimate relationship with an overly positive perception of their selected partner (Frye & Karney,
In an earlier study (2002, cited in Frye & Karney, 2004) they explored prospective and retrospective accounts of newly weds’ marital satisfaction in a longitudinal study. The results of that study suggested that couples retrospective assessment of marital satisfaction declined gradually to a time period of 2 ½ years, and then marital satisfaction began to increase. Considering this previous research exploring marital satisfaction of newly weds, the present study aimed to determine at what time in a relationship individuals begin to acknowledge both the negative as well as the positive qualities of their partner – to remove the “rose-coloured-glasses”, so to speak.

The present study’s specific hypotheses were as follows: a respondent’s overall relationship satisfaction would significantly positively correlate with their perception of the positive qualities of their relationship, and would significantly negatively correlate with their perception of the negative qualities of their relationship; a respondent’s length of time in relationship would significantly positively correlate with their perception of the negative qualities of their relationship, and would not significantly correlate with the their perception of the positive qualities of their relationship or the respondent’s overall relationship satisfaction; and a participant whose intimate relationship was longer than 2 ½ years in length would be significantly more likely to acknowledge the negative qualities of their partner, than a participant whose relationship was less than 2 ½ years in length.

Method

Participants
The sample consisted of 62 individuals who classified themselves as currently in a dual-earner relationship; 30 males (M=29.2, SD=3.1) and 32 females (M=27.9, SD=2.9). Mean length of intimate relationship was 4.7 years for the sample, with 41.9% indicating a ‘married’ status for their relationship. Respondents were all involved in a heterosexual relationship. Respondents were drawn from a wide range of employment contexts within the Melbourne area and all participants took part in the present study on a voluntary and anonymous basis.

Measures

Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS). The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) is a global measure of relationship satisfaction developed by Hendrick (1988) and has been found to be a good predictor of whether couples will stay together or split apart. The scale, originally consisting of seven-items was modified in the present study to include five of the seven items of the former scale. Items excluded in the present study were; “How good is your relationship compared to most” and “How many problems are there in your relationship”. Included items were measured using a five-point response scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely). Negative items on the scale are reverse scored and all items are summed with a higher score indicative of greater relationship satisfaction. The author claims good reliability and internal consistency for the scale with a reliability coefficient (α) of .86 (Hendrick, 1988).

The Positive and Negative Quality in Marriage Scale (PANQIMS). The Positive and Negative Quality in Marriage Scale (PANQIMS) is a brief, global measure of the extent positive and negative qualities are acknowledged as present in the relationship. The scale developed by Fincham and Linfield (1997) consists of six items; three items, measuring each of the positive and negative dimensions of the relationship. The scale was modified in the present study to reflect a generalised sample of married and non-married participants. Respondents were instructed to indicate their responses using an eleven-point response scale ranging from 0 (not at all) to 10 (extremely). Responses to the three items for each dimension were summed with higher scores for each dimension representing more positive and more negative evaluations, respectively. The authors claim good reliability and internal consistency for the scale with reliability coefficients (α) of .87 and .91 for males, and .90 and .89 for women, for positive and negative dimensions, respectively (Fincham & Linfield, 1997).

Non Instrument Measures. Standard demographic questions, such as; sex, age, occupation, annual salary, level of education, relationship status and relationship length, were included in the study.

Procedure
All participants were recruited via word of mouth of the researchers. Criteria for participation in the present study included: no children or other dependents reliant upon the participant, 25 - 35 years of age and currently engaged in some form of paid employment. Data was collected using a self-report questionnaire. Questionnaires were supplied with a reply paid envelope and respondents were instructed to complete the questionnaire and return to Swinburne University of Technology using the reply paid envelope.

Each questionnaire provided to the subject included a “Checklist for Participation” outlining the criteria for participation in the present study; and a covering letter explaining the purpose of the research; and informing prospective participants that their participation was
voluntary; and that all responses would remain confidential. Of the 240 questionnaires distributed, 62 were returned, a 25.8% return rate.

**Results**

Data tended to be moderately negatively skewed but it was considered insufficient to warrant statistical transformation towards normality. No sex differences were found for any of the measures used; so combined responses for males and females were used in the data analysis of this study, unless otherwise stated.

The Effect of Positive and Negative Relationship Quality, and Length of Relationship on General Relationship Satisfaction. The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS; Hendrick, 1988) was selected as the key variable to measure global relationship satisfaction. Pearson’s correlation coefficients were calculated between the RAS and the other relationship measures used in the study and are shown in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2 Positive Relationship Quality (PRQ; Fincham & Linfield, 1997) is significantly and moderately correlated with overall relationship satisfaction, as measured by the RAS. RAS is significantly and moderately correlated with Negative Relationship Quality (NRQ; Fincham & Linfield, 1997). Length of Relationship is significantly and moderately positively correlated with NQR and is not significantly correlated with RAS or PRQ.

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to determine the effect of length of relationship on participants’ perceived negative qualities of their relationship. A number of ANOVAs were performed between the variable of Length of Relationship and the three variables of RAS, PQR and NQR. Length of Relationship was categorized as less than 3 years versus greater than 3.1 years. The group differences for PQR and RAS were nonsignificant. However, those in relationships of three years or less reported less negative relationships ($M = 5.4, SD = 4.3$) than those in longer relationships ($M = 8.6, SD = 6.0$), $F(1,59)=5.0, p<.05$. Three years is significant as the length of time in a relationship when an individual first recognises equally the positive and the negative qualities of their partner.

**Discussion**

**Key Findings**

The focus of the present study was three-fold. First to explore the impact that changing societal influences have had on overall relationship satisfaction. Second to confirm that individuals do enter into intimate relationships with an overly positive perception of their chosen partner. Finally, to demonstrate that overly positive perceptions of one’s intimate partner at the commencement of a relationship do wane, as the length of time in a relationship increases.

A significant relationship was found between Hendrick’s (1988) overall measure of relationship satisfaction and the positive dimension of the modified PANQIMS, Fincham & Linfield, 1997). Conversely, the RAS demonstrated a significant negative relationship with the negative dimension of the PANQIMS, thus supporting the study’s first and second hypotheses. This result suggests that relationship satisfaction is not simply either growing stronger or declining. The results of the present study suggest that satisfaction with one’s intimate relationship is instead, a more complex interplay. This conclusion supports previous research (e.g., Fincham & Linsfield, 1997).

The present study was further interested in the effect that length of time of a relationship had on an individual’s ability to recognise the negative qualities of their partner. It was hypothesised that as the length of the individual’s relationship increased so would the acknowledgement of the negative qualities of the individual’s partner. This third hypothesis was supported in the present study.

Of greatest interest to the present study was at what length of time in a relationship – the “tipping-point” – do the “rose-coloured-glasses” get removed and the individual acknowledge equally their partner’s positive and negative qualities. A series of ANOVAs were calculated and the results of those analyses indicate that individuals begin to recognise the negative qualities of their intimate other at a relationship length of just over three years. This result supports that of a similar study that explored the perceived marital quality of 56 newly wedded couples, by Frye & Karney (2004).

Further, the acknowledgement of the negative attributes of one’s intimate partner does not necessarily translate into a decrease in one’s perception of the positive qualities of their partner. This suggests that one’s judgement of the positive and negative aspects of an initiate partner may be mutually exclusive, as suggested by Fincham and Linfield (1997).

**Limitations**

The present study explored the role of length of time in a relationship on relationship satisfaction and found that the “rose-coloured-glasses” of an intimate relationship seem to be removed at the three-year mark of an intimate relationship. The study explored the affect of relationship length for a sample of 25-35 year old dual-earner couples. Additional research is required to ascertain if the length of relationship ‘mark’ of three-years is consistent for other relationship dynamics. For example: older couples, couples that have been divorces
and have re-entered an intimate relationship, and same sex couples.

The sample also reported a slight skewing of the study’s data, which may suggest possible social desirability effects. Further research should employ an increased sample size.

Finally, although the present study drew its sample from a wide range of professions and industries all of the respondents in the study were from the Melbourne metropolitan area. Further research could include respondents from rural areas and also respondents from who are geographically dispersed across the entirety of both regional and metropolitan Australia.

Implications and Further Research

Much research into relationship satisfaction has been completed, predominantly exploring its role in a family and community context. Therefore, the present study will make recommendations regarding further research within an organisational context.

Research completed by Harmer (2003), in the area of work-life balance, indicated that for the younger generation of workers a greater weighting is proffered to job satisfaction and maintaining a high degree of happiness within one’s work, at the possible jeopardy of relationship satisfaction.

Although research completed by Netemeyer, Boles and McMurrian (1996) implies that the changing make-up of the modern family and relationship satisfaction would suggest its impact of work-life balance is an increasingly tenuous one; the impact of job demands on intimate relationship satisfaction is worthy of further consideration.

Changing social structures, the growing pressure to develop and maintain social interaction outside of the environment of the traditional family, and increasing work intensification are an ever increasing reality for Australia’s younger workers. This reality has been shown to have negative consequences for the sustainability of intimate relationships (Allen, Herts, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Barnett, 1994; Grzywacz & Marks, 2000; Judge, Watanabe, 1994). With Australia’s population growth in decline (ABS, 2002c) the country does not need a concurrent increase in relationship failure.

Conclusion

The current study found that the fragility of an individual’s intimate relationship does not manifest itself once they become aware and acknowledge the negative attributes of their partner. Although previous research does suggest that relationship satisfaction does decline with the passing of time (Frye & Karney, 2004) the present study suggests that, for sample of 25 to 35 year olds, this increased awareness of the negative qualities of one’s intimate partner does not translate into overall dissatisfaction in the relationship. The results suggest that overall relationship satisfaction is a complex interplay between relationship status, relationship length, and the acknowledged positive and negative qualities of one’s intimate other.

References


