

Effect of Attachment on Marital Satisfaction and Parenthood

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Abstract

The literature review presented herewith includes peer-reviewed articles integrating research from 1977 to 2009, with a two-fold purpose: To support the notion of the effect of attachment within the marital-parenting dyad, and to illustrate consistency in the body of work regarding attachment and relationships across time. Marital dissatisfaction during parenthood is an issue that continues to impact marriage and family counselors. Based on research studies, internal processes and unspoken conflicts within the couple dating back to the courtship phase seem to come to the surface during childrearing. All the samples used in the studies presented herewith were randomly stratified. Participants included in the articles reviewed for the current analysis consist of couples who had been married between six (6) months and 15 years with children ranging in age from infancy to adolescence. Limitations among the findings presented herewith include the application of self-reports, the short-term methodology, and the limited number of diverse participants in the samples.

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Oftentimes, the overall success of a marriage is assessed by the degree of marital satisfaction perceived by each partner. Gottman (1994) suggests that marital satisfaction is the result of a complex dynamic within the marital dyad, which may include: Love, affection, perceived marital stability (mutual commitment to the relationship), mutual empathy and respect. Marital dissatisfaction refers to the accumulative presence, frequency, and degree of criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling within the marital dyad (Gottman, 1994). Many married couples “report a decline in marital satisfaction” after becoming parents (Salmela-Aro, Saisto, Halmesmaki, & Nurmi, 2006, p. 782). Some researchers attempt to explain this phenomenon through the attachment theories. Charting support for the ambivalent attachment theory in specific as the culprit of marital dissatisfaction during parenthood is the objective of this literature review. The rationale for the current analysis is to contribute information to marriage and family counselors in their journey to becoming effective scientist-practitioners (Sheperis, Young, & Daniels, 2010).

Statement of the Problem

Marriage and family counselors continue to be challenged by couples who come to counseling reporting a decrease in their marital satisfaction after becoming parents. Recent studies indicate this decrease in marital satisfaction is pervasive and often leads into a downward spiral of disappointments (Gottman & Driver, 2005). These disappointments may motivate parents to avoid the conflict and look for external causes (Bagarozzi & Giddings, 1983). Bagarozzi and Giddings (1983) became aware of this dynamic and documented their findings several years ago: “Frequently, parents do not seek treatment for their relationship difficulties but bring in an asymptomatic child whom they identify as ‘the problem’ ” (p. 274). Uncovering

the factors beneath the couple's dissatisfaction has direct clinical and practical significance in the therapeutic session. This process of discovery begins with a question.

Research Question

What are the implications of attachment style on marital satisfaction and parenthood? Bagarozzi and Giddings (1983) emphasize that the child may be serving a need within the family system to find a balance to an unstable marriage (ambivalent commitment). Ambivalent commitment is underscored by ambivalent attachment. Attachment refers to the "propensity of human beings to form emotional bonds with others" (Bowlby, 1977, p. 201). Adult attachment styles are mostly representations of internal working models, which lean either toward secure or insecure attachment patterns with both dynamics existing on a continuum. Secure attachment refers to the degree to which an individual may feel comfortable in intimate relationships most of the time (Bowlby, 1977). An individual, who may be primarily functioning from a secure attachment base for the most part, is typically motivated to be both emotionally and physically available to a partner in a consistent manner (Bowlby, 1977).

Those individuals with a tendency toward an enduring, chronic, insecure attachment pattern such as ambivalent may tend to alternate between being temporarily available to their partners, and avoiding closeness at the same time (Bowlby, 1977). These two mutually conflicting internal processes (getting close and avoiding closeness) are likely to generate internal anxiety, which may be ultimately relieved by distancing. This pattern of relating tends to challenge the commitment to the relationship, and chips away at the emotional bond between the partners (Bowlby, 1977). In addition, Bowlby (1988) suggests that these internal working models are likely to be grounded in childhood, and remain relatively stable over the lifespan. It is important to emphasize, however, that both secure and insecure attachment patterns exist on a

continuum. Furthermore, Bowlby (1988) is referring to consistent and enduring patterns of ambivalence, not temporary *states* of ambivalence, which are considered part of the normative spectrum of the human experience. Unveiling and addressing the enduring, ambivalent attachment patterns and the conflicts that may result within the marital dyad are pivotal to marital and family counselors.

Review of the Literature

Influenced by Bowlby (1988), Moller, Hwang, and Wickberg (2006) argue that attachment patterns learned in childhood are likely to be manifested within the marital dyad, especially during stressful times. To support their hypotheses, Moller et al. (2006) conducted a one-time, empirical, quantitative study in which they sampled a group of 251 parents of infants, all of whom were from child care centers in Sweden. The sample was comprised of both first-time, and second-time parents. Based on multiple regression analysis, two instruments were used to measure the degree to which attachment style could predict marital satisfaction: The *Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS)*; Spanier, 1976) and the *Relationship Questionnaire (RQ)*; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). *DAS* is a self-report that measures the couples' perceived level of marital satisfaction. *RQ* measures the couples' attachment pattern: Secure, dismissing, preoccupied or fearful.

Based on the results, Moller et al. (2006) concluded there is a correlation linking insecure attachment patterns to marital satisfaction. Correlation alludes to the association of two or more variables, but it does not mean causation (Sheperis et al., 2010). Moller et al. (2006) also suggest that distress may be a mediating variable in the correlation between attachment and marital satisfaction, and point to parenting as an example of a stressful variable. Contrary to one of their original hypotheses, Moller et al. (2006) propose that second-time parents functioning from a

mostly insecure attachment base may be at higher risk of reporting marital dissatisfaction as compared to first-time parents mostly functioning from an insecure attachment base.

The typical disadvantage of using self-reports is one of the limitations detected in this study. Ickes (1993) submits that self-reports are unreliable mostly because many people are actually motivated to be unaware of their own feelings and thoughts for the most part. Moreover, suggesting that parenting may be a stressful factor mediating the correlation between attachment style and marital satisfaction without isolating the variable or producing evidence for that hypothesis may be considered another limitation. The time factor (short-time versus longitudinal) is considered a limitation because it questions the level of reliability of its findings. Reliability is assessed through repeated testing over a period of time, which is generally facilitated in longitudinal studies (Sheperis et al., 2010).

Longitudinal Study

Striving to avoid the limitation of short-term studies, Hirschberger, Srivastava, Marsh, Cowan, and Cowan (2009) conducted two separate, overlapping empirical, longitudinal, correlational studies. One of the goals of this study was to test attachment security in relation to marital satisfaction. With that in mind, over a span of 15 years, Hirschberger et al. (2009) collected data from two different cohorts. Most of the participants were middle-class Caucasians and less than 20% were from different ethnic backgrounds, all residents of the San Francisco Bay Area. The first group was comprised of 66 participants who were followed from the time of the couples' first pregnancy to the time their first child was in elementary school. The second group had 96 different couples who were followed from the time their children were in prekindergarten to the time they entered high school.

Among the instruments used to assess the data were the *Locke-Wallace Marital*

Adjustment Test (MAT; Locke & Wallace, 1959) and the *Relationship Questionnaire (RQ*; Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The *Locke-Wallace* test is designed to assess inter-relational adaptation of the spouses and make predictions on the degree of mutual accommodation. *RQ* is an instrument designed to assess attachment dimensions. Based on the results, Hirschberger et al. (2009) concluded that those individuals functioning mostly from an insecure attachment style may be more likely to be dissatisfied with their relationship much earlier than those with a more secured attachment base.

In concert with Moller et al. (2006), Hirschberger et al. (2009) assert their findings are consistent with the notion that a correlation may exist between marital satisfaction and attachment patterns. Also, in similarity with Moller et al. (2006), Hirschberger et al. (2009) submit that distress may be playing a mediating role in the correlation (attachment and marital satisfaction) and alludes to the responsibilities associated with parenting as an example of distress. Some of the limitations in Hirschberger et al.'s (2009) study include the typical biases found in self-report methodology, neglecting to show evidence for the distress hypothesis (internal processes), and the small sample size in both groups.

Internal Processes

In contrast to both Moller et al. (2006), and Hirschberger et al. (2009), Meyers and Landsberger (2002) take a different position: These researchers argue instead that childrearing *per se* is not likely to produce the type of distress that would lead to marital dissatisfaction. Meyers and Landsberger (2002) propose that an individual's own intrapersonal conflicts may be the underpinnings behind the perceived psychological distress. Meyers and Landsberger (2002) explain that those individuals mostly functioning from an ambivalent attachment framework may be unable to maintain close relationships. Therefore, these researchers suggest that the internal

working model of an individual primarily functioning from an ambivalent attachment base may perceive close relationships as a challenge to his or her own maladaptive coping skills. Meyers and Landsberger (2002) obtained their data through an empirical study in which they isolated other variables, such as social support in an effort to uncover evidence for their hypotheses on internal conflicts.

Based on the findings, Meyers and Landsberger (2002) concluded that ambivalent attachment is correlated to marital dissatisfaction, and it is not mitigated by social support from family or friends. Their study was conducted in a city in the Midwest of the United States, and included 73 married women between 25 and 48 years of age, mostly middle-class, European American, and mothers of elementary school children. Among the instruments used in this study were the *Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS)*; Spanier, 1976) designed to measure marital satisfaction, and the *Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI)*; Derogatis, 1993) designed to assess psychological symptomatology. A small sample of female-only participants with a limited diverse population, and the general disadvantages associated with self-reports are some of the limitations found in this study.

Ambivalence and Conflicts

Determined to prevent the limitations of gathering data through self-reports, Huston (2009) led a 13-year longitudinal, multi-wave, qualitative study based on clinical interviews and observations. The purpose of his study was to identify the role that courtship plays in foreshadowing marital success. Tapping into his own clinical experience, Huston's (2009) prime directive was grounded in the belief that the roots of marital discord are planted in courtship. Supported by the National Institute of Mental Health, Huston (2009) enlisted 168 predominantly Caucasian married couples from a rural area in Central Pennsylvania to support his hypothesis.

As a corollary, the participants were asked to keep a journal of their daily routine which became part of the overall data.

Based on the findings, Huston (2009) proposes that high ambivalence (ambivalent attachment) tends to be correlated to high conflict, and this pattern of relating to one another can be traced back to the courtship phase. Gottman and Driver (2005) define conflict as a sense of antagonism, which may be either overt, covert, or both. In many instances, conflicts may be the end result of unspoken interactions (Wile, 1993). Unaddressed conflicts within a marriage, according to Bagarozzi and Giddings (1983), have a purpose—to avoid the anxiety most likely triggered by internal processes. A limited group of participants from a diverse ethnic background is one of the limitations detected in Huston's (2009) study.

Discussion

The converging information illustrated in this literature review attempts to dig deep beneath the surface in an effort to identify the real problems driving couples to marriage and family counseling during the childrearing years. Couples who report a correlation between marital dissatisfaction and parenting may be dismissing their own individual conflicts, as well as those conflicts that may have existed in the relationship since courtship before the children were born. Instead, the couple may be motivated to look at the demands of childrearing as the tenet of their marital dissatisfaction. The empirical research reviewed herewith strives to serve as an open invitation to counselors to engage their perceptive and analytical skills to uncover the unspoken intricacies intertwined in the marital-parenting dyad.

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