MARITAL SATISFACTION AND SELF-DECEPTION:
RECONSTRUCTION OF RELATIONSHIP HISTORIES
AMONG OLDER ADULTS

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The relationships among marital aggrandizement, satisfaction with life, and marital satisfaction were examined among an international sample of older adults (N = 400). Three distinct groupings were identified on the basis of cluster analysis. A minority of participants emerged as being dissatisfied with life and marriage. This grouping (the distraught) holds realistic perceptions of their relationship history. The same is true for a larger grouping identified as the realistically content who appear satisfied with life and marriage. The largest grouping (Pollyannas) also appears highly satisfied with life and marriage. Of note, these participants also engage in selective recall negating the occurrence of negative events and perceptions of their spouse and marriage. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) suggests that Pollyannas convey a tendency for self-deception that distinguishes them from the other 2 groupings. These results are discussed in terms of demographic trends and directions for future research.

Keywords: marital satisfaction, self-deception, relationship histories, older adults.
With truth, one cannot live. To be able to live, one needs illusions.”

- Otto Rank

Cross-sectional researchers consistently indicate that older adults are happily married. For instance, older couples on average report that they are more content than their middle-aged peers. Across cohorts, marital satisfaction exhibits a curvilinear, u-shaped relationship with time as satisfaction is high at the outset (e.g., honeymoon period), dips in the middle years, and appears to rise again in later life (Gagnon, Hersen, Kabacoff, & Van Hasselt, 1999).

One explanation for this phenomenon pertains to sampling biases inherent in research with older couples. For instance, cross-sectional studies exclude persons who no longer choose to be married. Whereas newlyweds represent the population of married persons, older couples are a select subset. Overall satisfaction increases as the discontented fall from the ranks, artificially elevating mean levels relative to younger adults.

Another explanation pertains to the manner in which marital data are gathered. Aside from a paucity of observational studies, most information is obtained via self-report measures. Despite this, couples researchers rarely take biased responding into account as recall and motivational biases are considered infrequently (cf. O’Rourke et al., 1996; Williamson & Schulz, 1990). This leaves couples research susceptible to distortion and erroneous conclusions (see Kashy & Snyder, 1995).

Self-Report and Biased Responding

Biased responding has come to be viewed as a complex phenomenon (Paulhus, 1991); in addition to deliberate embellishment, research participants may under-report various behaviors and beliefs without awareness. In this vein, Paulhus (1984) has proposed a two-component model of socially desirable responding. As well as impression management (i.e., conscious dissembling or other distortion), persons may also engage in self-deception (i.e., an honest, yet overly positive self-presentation). This distinction suggests that biased responding is not solely intentional, but also may reflect a self-protective, psychological stance. In other words, some respondents choose to present themselves in a favorable light whereas others convey an overly positive self-image that they honestly endorse (Paulhus, 1984).

Biased responding in relation to marriage is believed to be distinct from self-deception and impression management (O’Rourke & Wenaus, 1998). This assertion stems from the hypothesis that the perception of self within relationships is distinct from individual self-awareness (Hansen, 1981; O’Rourke
et al., 1996). Support for this assertion is provided by research pertaining to the construct of marital aggrandizement (O’Rourke & Cappeliez, 2002).

**MARITAL AGGRANDIZEMENT AS A DISTINCT RESPONSE BIAS**

This response style is defined as *the propensity to negate the occurrence of negative events and perceptions over the course of one’s marital history*. Marital aggrandizement thus entails an idealized appraisal of one’s spouse and marriage to the exclusion of negative beliefs and perceptions (e.g., “My spouse has never made me angry”; “I do not recall a single argument with my spouse”). As a consequence, those who convey such idealized depictions invariably express exaggerated responses to other marital measures. Contentment within marriage, however, does not necessarily entail aggrandizement of one’s relationship history. In other words, it is believed that marital satisfaction can exist independent of marital aggrandizement whereas the reverse does not occur (i.e., marital aggrandizement without marital satisfaction).

We further contend that marital aggrandizement does not entail psychopathology but serves an adaptive function. Support for this assertion is found in studies with spouses of persons with dementia (O’Rourke et al., 1996; O’Rourke & Wenaus, 1998). Within this context, spousal caregivers appear to reconcile the continuity of their marriages with negative interpersonal experience (i.e., the illness of their spouses). In order to sustain contentment and buffer themselves from dysphoria, spouses hold to memories that validate current role demands. This phenomenon is congruent with the notion of cognitive dissonance as applied to recollections of one’s interpersonal history (Ross, 1989).

Support for the malleable nature of interpersonal memories is found in longitudinal research conducted by Holmberg and Holmes (1994). In this study, men who came to view their marriage less positively appeared to impose a negative memory bias upon beliefs and perceptions vis-à-vis those previously reported. A related process resulted in a positive reconstruction of the past by those who came to see their relationships more positively (Holmberg & Holmes, 1994). Reconstruction of relationship beliefs appears to occur concordantly with current perceptions. These findings support the hypothesis that autobiographical memories can be recast in relation to current beliefs and awareness (Neisser & Winograd, 1988).

Although the theory regarding marital aggrandizement evolved within context of research regarding biased responding, the nature of this construct remains incomplete in relation to associated phenomena (i.e., self-deception, impression management). This observation forms the basis of the current study. Here, we seek to determine if subsets of older adults differ in terms of their reliance upon marital aggrandizement relative to marital satisfaction and overall satisfaction with life. In keeping with previous research (e.g., O’Rourke & Wenaus, 1998), it
is assumed that greater reliance upon marital aggrandizement is related to marital satisfaction as well as life satisfaction. If so, do groupings differ in terms of their overall self-presentation (i.e., relative to other indices of biased responding)?

**METHOD**

**Participants**
Marital aggrandizement is assumed to emerge over time. Among newlyweds, for instance, heightened satisfaction may reflect the novelty of married life and incomplete knowledge of one’s spouse. Early on, for instance, one may endorse statements such as, “I have never known a moment of sexual frustration during my marriage”, because the experience has yet to occur; objective endorsement, however, becomes increasingly unlikely with the passage of time. To ensure that concurrence with such statements entails selective recall, participation in this study was limited to those over 49 years of age who had been married at least 20 years. Admittedly, these criteria are arbitrary. Conservative inclusion criteria (i.e., exclusion of younger adults) were applied to increase certainty that endorsement of statements was in accord with the operational definition of marital aggrandizement.

A total of 400 participants were recruited for this study (188 men, 212 women). The average age of participants was 62 years ($SD = 8.73$) with 14.6 years of education on average ($SD = 3.45$). Participants had been married an average of 36.5 years ($SD = 9.44$). The majority were in their first marriage (78%) though a notable percentage had been married once (17%) or twice before (5%).

**Printed-page Participants** A total of 88 participants completed the printed-page version of study questionnaires. These respondents were recruited through media advertisements, notices appearing in seniors’ publications, contacts with community groups, and word-of-mouth. Flyers were also placed in locations frequented by older adults (e.g., community centers, seniors’ housing complexes). The majority of questionnaires were returned (all but 9, or 10.2%). This high rate of response is probably due to the fact that prospective participants expressed interest, or agreed to take part, before questionnaires were sent to them.

**Internet Participants** A website constructed for this study provided 312 useable sets of responses. Postings announcing this study were placed at dedicated websites for seniors (e.g., American Association of Retired Persons, SeniorNet, 50+ Net, Age of Reason). Direct appeals were also made to older adults seeking email pen-pals, a request for participants was placed in an Australian electronic seniors’ newsletter, and reciprocal links were placed between this and other websites directed toward older adults.
Of those who identified their country of origin, more than 70% stated that they lived in the United States (41 of 50 states). Participants from Canada, England, Israel, India, Brazil, Austria, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand were also recruited.

Of note, Internet and printed-page participants appeared comparatively similar. Not only were responses to each scale indistinguishable, but few demographic differences appeared between groups. For instance, years of education did not differ ($t[392] = .21, \text{ns}$), years married ($t[392] = 1.29, \text{ns}$), gender composition ($\chi^2 [1, n = 399] = .02, \text{ns}$), nor socioeconomic categorization based upon work performed either at the time of our study or prior to retirement ($\chi^2 [4, n = 387] = 2.78, \text{ns}$). Printed-page respondents ($M = 64.1, SD = 9.27$), however, indicated that they were somewhat older than those who responded online ($M = 61.4, SD = 8.5$; $t[397] = 2.54, p < .05$). Otherwise, participants recruited via the two methodologies appeared largely similar.

**Measures**

**Life Satisfaction Index – Z** Life satisfaction has been a primary construct measured among older adults within the domain of psychological well-being. Satisfaction with life is believed to be integral to successful aging (McDowell & Newell, 1996). The Life Satisfaction Index (LSI-Z; Wood, Wylie, & Sheafor, 1969) is composed of 13 items to which respondents indicate agreement or disagreement. The LSI-Z contains eight positively- and five negatively-keyed items. Possible scores range from 0 to 13 with higher totals suggestive of greater life satisfaction.

**Dyadic Adjustment Scale** The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976) is a 32-item measure developed to assess marital satisfaction. Responses are recorded along a series of 5- and 6-point Likert-type scales, two yes/no questions, and one final question in which persons are asked to endorse the statement which best reflects their expectation of relationship continuity (six response alternatives provided). The DAS provides a total score composed of four subscales. Most often, only the total is reported. Scale scores over 99 reflect marital stability and overall satisfaction (Stuart, 1992); however, elevated totals (i.e., DAS > 119), suggest inordinate self-sacrifice or idealization of the relationship (Kazak, Jarmas, & Snitzer, 1988).

**Marital Aggrandizement Scale** The Marital Aggrandizement Scale (MAS; O’Rourke & Cappeliez, 2002) was developed as a couples measure of biased responding. The 18 MAS items were written in extreme terms such that they cannot be endorsed without conveying an inordinately positive depiction of the marriage. Respondents indicate their degree of agreement to each statement upon a 7-point, Likert-type scale. Only upper-end responses (i.e., 6 or 7) are tallied (subsequent to reversal of four negatively keyed items). Possible MAS totals
range from 0 to 18 with higher scores suggestive of greater marital aggrandizement.

As reported by O’Rourke and Cappeliez (2002), MAS responses are comparable by gender as men ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 4.16$) and women ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 3.82$) provided statistically indistinguishable MAS totals ($t[160] = 1.18$, $ns$). Nor do years of education ($t[160] = .02$, $ns$), number of times married ($t[160] = -.01$, $ns$), religious denomination ($F[8,156] = 1.16$, $ns$), nor religious service attendance ($t[153] = .08$, $ns$) appear related to MAS response levels.

Indices of internal consistency have consistently been measured as $\alpha = .84$. Test-retest reliability of responses is reported as $r(200) = .80$ over an average interval of 15 months (O’Rourke & Cappeliez, 2002). Responses to the MAS also appear to be gender invariant as male and female respondents appear to interpret and respond to MAS items in a similar manner (O’Rourke & Cappeliez, 2001). These findings suggest that responses to the MAS provide a reliable index of biased responding.

**Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding – Version 6** The Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding (BIDR; Paulhus, 1994) is a 40-item measure of biased responding, composed to two 20-item subscales. Respondents rate their degree of agreement to each statement along a 7-point Likert-type scale with one point assigned for each six or seven response (subsequent to reversal of negatively keyed items).

As reported by Paulhus (1991), correlation coefficients between subscales range from $r = .05$ to $r = .40$. Internal consistency of responses ranges from $\alpha = .65$ to $\alpha = .75$ for the self-deception (SD) subscale and $\alpha = .75$ to $\alpha = .80$ for the impression management (IM) subscale (Paulhus, 1994).

**RESULTS**

**PARTICIPANT GROUPINGS**

Cluster analysis was performed on the basis of responses to the LSI-Z, DAS, and MAS. These independent variables were selected in keeping with the operational definition of marital aggrandizement and related assumptions. As previously noted, it is assumed that marital satisfaction can occur with, and without, the concurrent presence of marital aggrandizement. Furthermore, it is assumed that marital aggrandizement serves an adaptive function. Therefore, an association between marital aggrandizement and elevated life satisfaction is hypothesized among those in enduring relationships.

Ward’s hierarchical method was employed to form clusters with minimal variance within, and maximal differences across each. A three-cluster solution was identified as a result. The viability of this solution was supported by multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA; Hotelling’s $T = 4.38$, $p < .01$) with significant
univariate difference indicated for marital satisfaction ($F[2,397] = 835.5, p < .01$), marital aggrandizement ($F[2,397] = 66.5, p < .01$), and satisfaction with life ($F[2,397] = 77.4, p < .01$). Cluster composition did not differ as a function of recruitment method ($t[400] = 1.46, ns$).

The largest grouping emerged with elevated scores for each variable ($n = 208$, or 52%). These older adults appear highly satisfied with life (LSI-Z; $M = 11.3, SD = 1.62$), their marriage (DAS; $M = 126.6, SD = 7.95$), and reported high levels of marital aggrandizement (MAS; $M = 7.57, SD = 3.79$); as such, they are identified as Pollyannas. Post hoc analyses (LSD, or least significant difference method) indicate that this grouping differs from all others on DAS, MAS, and LSI-Z scale scores.

The second cluster was labeled the Realistically content ($n = 156$, or 39%). These participants appeared satisfied in marriage (DAS; $M = 100.4, SD = 9.96$) and with life overall (LSI-Z; $M = 9.19, SD = 3.03$), yet portray a more balanced depiction of their relationship histories (MAS; $M = 3.69, SD = 3.03$).

The final cluster emerged as the smallest of the three ($n = 36$, or 9%). These participants were labeled as Distraught. Relative to the overall sample, this grouping presented with low levels of marital satisfaction (DAS; $M = 62.7, SD = 13.2$), life satisfaction (LSI-Z; $M = 6.33, SD = 3.59$), and marital aggrandizement (MAS; $M = 3.11, SD = 3.27$). Of note, levels of marital aggrandizement did not differ between this group and the Realistically content (MAS; $t[192] = 1.01, ns$).

A second MANOVA was computed to compare clusters in terms of responses to the BIDR for which multivariate significance was again observed (Hotelling’s $T = .04, p < .01$). Univariate analyses indicate a significant difference across groups for self-deception ($F[2,389] = 7.70, p < .01$) but not the BIDR impression management subscale ($F[2,389] = 2.81, ns$). Post hoc analyses (LSD) reveal

![Cluster composition](image-url)

Figure 1: Cluster composition of the derived sample of older married adults ($N = 400$)

*Note: Variables expressed as standardized scores to convey between-group differences.*
significant differences between the Pollyannas and the Realistically content \((p < .05)\). Of note, the Realistically content do not differ from the Distraught. Persons presenting with heightened levels of marital satisfaction and marital aggrandizement appear to convey a general tendency for self-deception (i.e., pertaining to both themselves and their marriages). This result provides further understanding of the nature of marital aggrandizement. This construct does not appear to be associated with a purposeful attempt to convey an embellished depiction of one’s marital history, suggesting that marital aggrandizement exists as a relationship-specific mode of self-deception.

**DISCUSSION**

The results in this study suggest that the majority of participants are satisfied with married life, consistent with previous research; however, the bulk of these persons also display a tendency to negate negative memories of their spouse and relationship history. This phenomenon appears to be associated with a general tendency for self-deception.

The relative proportion of persons identified as Pollyannas is a notable finding to emerge from this study. In contrast to the assumption that selective recall occurs among only a small percentage of married adults, the current study suggests this tendency is not uncommon. To the contrary, experimental research suggests a general bias toward positive memory and emotion in later life (see Charles, Mather, & Cartensen, 2003).

The human propensity for adaptive self-deception is truly remarkable (Taylor, Kemeny, Reed, Bower, & Gruenewald, 2000). Faced with problematic life circumstances, individuals consistently engage in selective information processing and recall to distance themselves from the reality of their lives, past and present. A related phenomenon may underlie the relationship between marital satisfaction and marital aggrandizement. Similar to the construct of depressive realism (Alloy & Abramson, 1988), illusory thinking appears to promote psychological well-being (O’Rourke, 2002) – and similarly, negating negative perceptions of one’s spouse and marital history appears to be associated with heightened life satisfaction.

**GENERALIZABILITY AND LIMITATIONS OF FINDINGS**

Although the majority of participants in this study presented as Pollyannas, it cannot be concluded that the same relative groupings exist within the general population; it must be stressed that these are self-selected participants. On the whole, it is quite possible that the realistically content and the distraught are more numerous than the results of this study would suggest. These older adults may be less inclined to share their perceptions of married life.
Use of the Internet for this study afforded participants considerable anonymity, which is advantageous in social desirability research (Paulhus, 1991). With anonymity, however, comes concern regarding misrepresentation. Even though we requested the assistance of persons over 49 who had been married for more than 19 years, it cannot be stated definitively that all respondents met these inclusion criteria. On the basis of demographic information, for instance, two widowed persons were identified and excluded.

Nor can it be said that this study is representative of the current cohort of older adults given that participants had completed an average of 14.6 years of education. This grouping is more educated than the norm as the majority had undertaken some postsecondary training. Similar to most research with self-selected participants, persons choosing to take part in the current study were more educated than the populations from which they were drawn. This limits generalizability of findings as responses may not correspond to older adults with less education. Therefore, responses to study measures may differ from the broader population. This observation underscores the need to replicate the findings from this study with other samples (e.g., same-sex couples) and research methodologies (e.g., randomly recruited participants).

At the turn of the 19th century, the average life expectancy in Canada was 48 years (Urquhart, 1965). Today, those over 84 years represent the fastest growing segment of our population (Statistics Canada, 2001). Although persons today tend to marry later, extended life expectancy conceivably means that middle-aged persons may be married 50, 60, or 70 years. For the first time in human history, these older adults may well be married for more years subsequent to child rearing than before. Such demographic trends necessitate further study of married life among older adults. We cannot assume that the factors contributing to perceived satisfaction in relationships are the same for the young and the not-so-young. Further study is required to provide a richer understanding of the complexities of marital satisfaction and marital aggrandizement across the lifespan.

REFERENCES


