

Gender and Conjugal Differences in Happiness

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ABSTRACT. The author examined conjugal congruence on 4 role experiences—spousal, parental, filial, worker—and on subjective well-being (SWB). According to purposive sampling strategy, 222 community adults (111 married couples) in Taiwan completed a research questionnaire. Conjugal congruence on role experiences was linked to conjugal congruence on SWB as well as personal well-being. Analyses showed that conjugal congruence on role experiences (except the worker role) and SWB was generally high. However, some conjugal discrepancies persisted: The husbands were more committed to the worker role, whereas the wives were more committed to the parental role. Furthermore, conjugal discrepancies in role experiences were related to conjugal discrepancies in SWB as well as to husbands' happiness.

AFTER REVIEWING DECADES OF RESEARCH on happiness and life satisfaction, Argyle (1987) concluded that there is little gender difference in satisfaction with life as a whole or in positive affect, although women have more negative affect and more intense feelings. Myers and Diener (1996) further suggested that subjective well-being (SWB) does not at all depend on external factors and that SWB is evenly distributed across gender, age, socioeconomic status, race, and wealth. However, the issue is far from closed. Wood, Rhodes, and Whelan (1989) conducted a meta-analysis of 93 studies and found a significant gender difference in SWB: Women were happier than men; nonetheless, the magnitude of that effect was small. Similarly, Mookherjee (1997) analyzed the 10-year (1982-1991) General Social Surveys' data on 12,168 people (National Opinion

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Research Center, 1991) in the United States and found that in every subgroup, the women were more satisfied with life than the men were. Among Chinese community adults in Taiwan as well, the women professed greater happiness than the men did (Lu, Shih, Lin, & Ju, 1997).

Closer examination revealed that, on overall level of SWB, although women may not be different from men or may have slightly higher ratings than men, there were significant and profound gender differences on specific facets of the SWB construct. On the *quantitative* aspect, women were found to be more satisfied than men with their social relations and living environment (Lu, 1996), and women also had greater variance in the distribution of happiness scores than men did (Lu et al., 1997).

On the *qualitative* aspect, McCulloch (1992) found that the factorial structure of the Life Satisfaction Index (Neugartn, Havighurst, & Tobin, 1961) was affected by the Gender \times Race interaction. The dimensionality of SWB may be different for the two sexes. Researchers have speculated that sources of happiness and satisfaction may be different for men and women (Argyle, 1987). A qualitative interview study focusing on sources of happiness among Taiwanese people (Lu & Shih, 1997) provided valuable empirical evidence. The women claimed that they derived greater happiness from harmonious interpersonal relationships, especially those involving family members, whereas the men claimed to derive greater happiness from material pursuits and career success. This pattern was congruent with inferences based on gender role theories (e.g., Baken, 1966), in which the male psyche was described as a sense of agency, and the female psyche, in contrast, as a sense of communion.

More recent evidence has suggested that adult men and women may indeed have different patterns of experiences in a variety of important social roles (Lu, 1997). Taiwanese women seemed to experience the spousal and parental roles more intensely, whereas Taiwanese men seemed to experience the worker role more intensely. Furthermore, predictors of happiness were different for the two genders across various family developmental stages. These results taken together suggest not only that the dimensionality and sources of SWB may be different for men and for women but also that the fundamental conceptualization of SWB may be distinct for men and for women.

So far, there seem to be meaningful quantitative as well as qualitative differences in SWB between the two sexes. However, one common feature of the existing studies is the treatment of gender differences as an aggregated group difference—namely, men contrasted with women—transcending all social relationships. This strategy may introduce certain confounding variables. For instance, most studies have included a large proportion of married respondents, and evidence has indicated that a stable marriage enhances SWB (Andrew & Withey, 1976; Argyle, 1987). The greater SWB of married respondents is not limited to Western countries (Mastekaasa, 1994). Wood et al. (1989) asserted that the gender differences in SWB may at least be explained by the woman's receiving

greater benefit from marriage. However, opposing views insist that marriage is equally beneficial for the two genders (Mookherjee, 1997) or that men receive more support and care from marriage (Argyle, 1987).

One way of integrating the seemingly disparate array of studies pertaining to gender and marital status differences in SWB is to examine gender differences within the context of a marital relationship, namely, conjugal differences in SWB. This line of study is especially relevant in a Chinese society. According to the aforementioned gender theories (Baken, 1966), men are trained in most societies to be independent and assertive, whereas women are taught to be dependent and expressive. The paternalistic values and the resultant practices in Chinese societies have further magnified and sustained this gender socialization. Accordingly, men and women have been assigned different roles and ways of life deemed fitting for their specific qualities: Men are responsible for dealing with the "outside" world, whereas women are responsible for dealing with the "inside" world. In a familistic culture, the outside-inside division cuts along family borders. Lu (1997) found that the spousal role, parental role, filial role, and worker role were important social-familial roles among Chinese adults. Among those four roles, men experienced their worker roles more intensely, whereas women assigned more importance to their parental roles, derived greater satisfaction from their spousal roles, and reported higher levels of stress related to motherhood. Evidently, gender-related role identification persists in modern Taiwan.

In Confucian ethics, family is the most important value, and the individual is inextricably tied to the family. Continuation and prosperity of the family are the ultimate goals of a Chinese life. These values are deeply embedded in the culture and have become the "collective unconscious." They are not likely to change with the lapse of time or with the invasion of Western values and ways of life. Lu (1997) found robust relationships between people's experiences of family roles and their personal happiness. The pattern of gender differences in happiness also attested to the stability of core values in Chinese society. Nonetheless, conjugal congruence may have confounded the presumed gender differences, because the level of analysis was women versus men as two aggregated groups.

On the basis of the aforementioned rationale of examining gender differences in SWB within the conjugal relationship and by taking into account the characteristics of Chinese familism, I aimed in the present study to answer the following three questions:

Research Question 1: What is the extent of conjugal congruence on social-family role experiences and SWB?

Research Question 2: What variables influence this congruence?

Research Question 3: Is this congruence related to the individual's well-being?

Method

Respondents

I used multistage systematic probability random sampling to survey married adults (age range: 18–65 years) living in one randomly chosen district in the city of Kaohsiung in southern Taiwan. Between December 1996 and March 1997, trained interviewers interviewed in their homes 222 respondents (111 married couples), who completed questionnaires measuring the following variables.

Measurements

Demographic information. Each respondent's personal background information was recorded: age, gender, education attainment, occupation, family type, family size, and family income.

Personal characteristics. Extraversion and neuroticism were measured by the Extraversion and Neuroticism subscales in the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (Eysenck, 1975). In the present study, the reliability coefficients of the two subscales were .83 and .62, respectively. Higher scores indicated higher levels of the specific personal characteristics.

Family roles. On 5-point rating scales, the respondents evaluated four family roles (spousal, parental, filial, and worker) on four dimensions (importance, rewards, stress, and satisfaction). A higher score indicated more experiences of a particular dimension within a particular role.

Mental health. I assessed mental health by using the Chinese Health Questionnaire (Cheng & Williams, 1989), which measures minor psychiatric morbidities such as depression, anxiety, and common somatic symptoms. In the present study, the reliability of this scale was .85. A higher score indicated a greater amount of reported psychological symptoms.

Happiness. I measured happiness by using a short version of the Chinese Happiness Inventory (Lu, 1996). It pertains to general aspects of SWB, such as positive affect, (lack of) negative affect, and life satisfaction, as well as culture-bound aspects generated from a qualitative study (Lu & Shih, 1997). In the present study, the reliability of the Chinese Happiness Inventory was .92. A higher score indicated a higher level of reported happiness.

Results

According to the demographic information provided by the respondents, the age ranges of the husbands and the wives were 22–65 years ($M = 41.14$, $SD =$

9.35) and 22–55 years ($M = 36.94$, $SD = 8.82$), respectively. The mean years of formal education for the husbands and the wives were 13.75 years ($SD = 2.97$) and 12.80 years ($SD = 3.09$), respectively. Most of the husbands (82.7%) had managerial or professional jobs, whereas a smaller proportion of the wives (60%) had jobs of the same level; 1.8% of the wives were homemakers. More than half of the families (55.1%) were nuclear families, and the average monthly family income (in New Taiwanese dollars) was \$91,600 (U.S. \$2,863). Thus, the husbands, compared with the wives, tended to be older and better educated and to hold more prestigious jobs. Overall, the present sample was composed of middle-aged, married, well-educated, and well-paid couples heading comparatively small households.

I examined conjugal congruence on role experiences by correlating the scores of a husband and those of his wife for a particular construct across the entire sample of 111 husband–wife (H–W) pairs. This procedure is analogous to the temporal autocorrelations or the pre- and postcorrelations in a within-subject design. Thus, I computed 16 Pearson's correlation coefficients (4 roles \times 4 facets). For the spousal role, all coefficients (ranging from .25 to .44) reached statistical significance. For the parental role, all coefficients (ranging from .83 to .97) again reached statistical significance. For the filial role, all coefficients (ranging from .27 to .35) once again reached statistical significance. Finally, for the worker role, only the correlation coefficient for rewards (.34) reached statistical significance.

I examined conjugal differences on role experiences and SWB by conducting paired t tests (4 roles \times 4 facets). In this series of analyses, the husbands and the wives were treated as two dependent samples, because almost all the H–W correlations noted earlier were significant. Of 16 t tests, 6 yielded significant results. For the spousal role, the husbands were more satisfied than their wives were, $t(110) = 2.39$, $p < .05$. For the parental role, the wives reported greater importance, $t(109) = -2.17$, $p < .05$; more rewards, $t(109) = -2.40$, $p < .05$; and more stress, $t(109) = -2.62$, $p < .01$, than did their husbands. For the worker role, however, this pattern was reversed: The husbands reported greater importance, $t(100) = 3.69$, $p < .001$, as well as more stress, $t(100) = 2.54$, $p < .05$, than did their wives.

Similarly, conjugal congruence on SWB also reached statistical significance. For mental health, the H–W correlation was .42, $p < .001$, whereas for happiness, the correlation was .38, $p < .001$. However, paired t tests revealed no significant conjugal difference on mental health, $t(103) = -0.31$, *ns*. Nonetheless, the wives tended to be happier than their husbands, $t(96) = -2.42$, $p < .05$.

What variables, then, influenced the conjugal congruence or differences on role experiences and SWB? For statistical representations, I subtracted a wife's score on a particular construct from her husband's score and then used the absolute value of this result (DIF) in further analyses.

I conducted Pearson's correlation analyses with age, years of education,

extraversion, and neuroticism as independent variables; role experiences and SWB were dependent variables. There were significant results. Both the husband's age and the wife's age were positively correlated with conjugal discrepancies on the importance of spousal role, $r = .22$ and $r = .28$, respectively, $p < .05$; with rewards, $r = .41$ and $r = .42$, respectively, $p < .001$; and with the stress of the parental role, $r = .28$ and $r = .33$, respectively, $p < .01$. Wife's age was further correlated, but weakly, with conjugal discrepancies on the importance and the satisfaction of the parental role, $r = .30$ and $r = .25$, respectively, $p < .01$. Both the husband's and the wife's education levels, $r = -.19$ and $r = -.22$, respectively, $p < .05$, were negatively, but weakly, correlated with conjugal discrepancies on the rewards of the parental role. The wife's education was further correlated weakly with conjugal discrepancies on the satisfaction of the parental role, $r = -.25$, $p < .01$. The wife's extraversion was negatively correlated, again weakly, with conjugal discrepancies on the rewards of the filial role, $r = -.21$, $p < .05$, whereas the wife's neuroticism was negatively correlated with conjugal discrepancies on happiness, $r = -.23$, $p < .05$.

I conducted another series of Pearson's correlation analyses with conjugal discrepancies on role experiences as independent variables; conjugal discrepancies on SWB were dependent variables. There were significant results. Conjugal discrepancies on the stress of the filial role were positively correlated with conjugal discrepancies on mental health, $r = .21$, $p < .05$. Conjugal discrepancies on the rewards of the spousal role, the parental role, and the filial role, $r = .20$, $r = .26$, $r = .24$, respectively, $p < .05$, as well as the stress of the parental role, $r = .32$, $p < .001$, were all correlated with conjugal discrepancies on happiness.

To examine whether the conjugal discrepancies on role experiences were predictive of the individual's well-being, I carried out two series of hierarchical regression analyses with the husband's happiness and the wife's happiness as dependent variables. For both sets of regression, demographics (age and education) were entered first, followed by personality traits (extraversion and neuroticism), to control for their potential influence on the criterion variables. Mental health was then entered, followed finally by the conjugal discrepancies in role experiences, which were based on the results of a previous correlation analysis. For husband's happiness, three significant predictors in the final model explained 45% of the total variance, $F(3, 91) = 24.86$, $p < .001$. Conjugal discrepancies on the importance of the filial role, $\beta = -.22$, $p < .001$, were still significant after I controlled for extraversion, $\beta = .34$, $p < .001$, and mental health, $\beta = -.42$, $p < .001$.

For wife's happiness, again three significant predictors in the final model explained 41% of the total variance, $F(4, 83) = 16.48$, $p < .001$. Extraversion, $\beta = .25$, $p < .05$, was positively related to the wife's happiness, whereas neuroticism and mental health, $\beta = -.29$ and $\beta = -.28$, respectively, $p < .05$, were negative predictors. However, none of the conjugal discrepancies on role experiences were significant predictors.

Discussion

In the present study, I attempted to examine gender differences from a new perspective—that is, conjugal congruence or discrepancy on social role experiences and SWB—and to further examine the relationship of this congruence (or lack of it) with an individual's SWB. As stated earlier in the present study, when men and women were treated as two aggregated groups, the women tended to exhibit a slightly greater SWB than men did, and they seemed to possess a conceptualization of happiness somewhat different from that of men. When I examined conjugal differences, the possible confounding of marital status in a heterogeneous sample was removed; hence, a "purer" gender-related pattern should emerge. In the present study, the wives were happier than the husbands, but no differences in mental health were reported. These results were consistent with the previous finding (Argyle, 1987; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987) of greater SWB in women but not with assertions of gender differences in mental health.

Conjugal congruence on role experiences was generally high, except for the worker role. Furthermore, conjugal discrepancies were centered mainly on the parental role and the worker role. The husbands were more committed to the latter, reporting greater importance as well as higher stress, whereas the wives were more committed to the former, reporting greater importance and greater rewards as well as higher stress. It is clear that both the concept of communal relationships and gender role identification are needed in examination of the present findings.

Social psychologists have distinguished between communal relationships and exchange relationships. Interactions between family members are usually considered communal; those involved do not keep track of rewards or costs to themselves but are more concerned with the needs of others (Argyle & Henderson, 1985; Clark & Reis, 1988). Accumulating evidence indicates a *common fate* phenomenon in a marital relationship. For instance, researchers have shown that a chronic illness generates strong emotions in both the sufferer and the spouse. Both members of such couples have been found to be affected not only by their own responses to the illness but also by the emotional state of their partner (Kelley, 1979; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). In a study of healthy spouses of rheumatoid arthritis patients, both the patient's degree of disability and level of depression were stressors; both contributed significantly and independently to the well spouse's level of distress (Revenson & Majerovitz, 1991). More general findings have indicated that life with a depressed partner is highly stressful and can lead to depressive symptoms in the nondepressed partner as well (Coyne et al., 1987; Krantz & Moos, 1987). Such emotional contagion results from the high interdependence of conjugal partners. The strong conjugal congruence found in the present study confirmed this common fate thesis and extended it to critical role experiences within the context of family life.

The common fate thesis may be more applicable in Chinese society, in which family is at the center of human existence, than in other cultures. The uni-

verse of Chinese social relationships can be divided into the co-existent inner system and the collective outer system. The first system is composed mainly of family members and roughly corresponds to the Western idea of *primary* group, whereas the second system involves people outside the family and corresponds to a *secondary* group.

Among the Chinese people, the influential Confucian philosophy presupposes that the life of each individual is only a link in that person's family lineage and that an individual is a continuation of his or her ancestors. Unlike Western cultures dominated by Christianity, Chinese culture does not proclaim the pursuit of salvation in the next life or the actualization of an individual's potential as the ultimate concern; rather, the Chinese culture advocates striving to expand and preserve the prosperity and vitality of the family. Confucian philosophy stresses the collective welfare of the family or clan (extending to the society and the entire human race) more than it stresses individual welfare. Thus, for the Chinese people, happiness is the happiness of the family, which extends to the happiness of the society, rather than the happiness of the individual. Family as a commune binds its members, especially conjugal partners, in health and sickness and in happiness and distress. Collectivistic values and concerns are very evident. The striking conjugal congruence on family role experiences, mental health, and happiness observed in the present study offers strong support for the theoretical reasoning just described.

Notwithstanding this strong conjugal congruence, a clear pattern of conjugal discrepancies seemed to co-exist in the present sample. The aforementioned gender role identification pattern in a Chinese society was borne out by the empirical results: The husbands tended to be more committed to the worker role, whereas the wives were more committed to the parental role. Moreover, the only sets of low conjugal congruence involved the worker role, the only role performed outside the family. These empirical findings corroborated nicely the theoretical description that men are responsible for dealing with the "outside" world (performing well in the worker role), whereas women are responsible for dealing with the "inside" world (performing well on the parental role). The conjugal level analysis in the present study complemented an earlier group-level-gender-differences analysis (Lu, 1997) and further confirmed that gender-related role identification still prevails in modern Taiwan and, to a large extent, shapes family life.

Last, I found in the present study that conjugal discrepancies on role experiences were related to conjugal discrepancies on SWB and, therefore, further underline the importance and potential value of analyzing critical cultural role experiences (e.g., family roles for the Chinese) in relation to personal well-being (Lu, 1997). With the advantage of this conjugal level of analysis, the present results may also help to clarify the gender differences in well-being documented in the literature (e.g., Argyle, 1987; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1987). Marriage may be equally beneficial for men and for women; I could ascertain no differences on mental health at the conjugal level. Nonetheless, gaps in role commitment or

experiences could lead to gaps in SWB within a marital relationship. For marriage counselors and therapists, this finding should be enlightening: It is not very useful to know how men and women generally differ in their happiness; it is more informative to probe how a husband and wife perceive and perform their major roles differently, which in turn may determine their meaningful differences in happiness.

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