PREDICTORS OF COUPLE SATISFACTION

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Abstract: *In this paper we will present the results of research whose main purpose was to analyse the associations between couple satisfaction and some predictors as: attachment, gender, age, marital status, and educational attainment. In the first part, we will briefly present the literature consulted and the most relevant ideas. The second section is devoted to the methodology. The results showed that people with a secure attachment style have high couple satisfaction, women are more satisfied in the relationship compared to men, adults have lower relationship satisfaction as they get older, people with higher education are more satisfied in the couple, and unmarried people are also more satisfied with the couple relationship.*

Keywords: *couple relationships, couple satisfaction, attachment*

1. Introduction

Romantic relationships have consequences for at least two important areas of life: subjective well-being and health. First, people who are satisfied with their relationship are more satisfied with their life as a whole, Bühler et al. (2021, p. 2) notes. Satisfaction in other areas of life, such as work and friendships, is much less predictive of people's overall happiness than satisfaction in the area of romantic relationships. Second, people in fulfilling relationships report better health. Thus, understanding the normative trajectory of relationship satisfaction can help design effective interventions aimed at improving well-being and health, the authors note.

In the first part of the paper, which is dedicated to the overview of the literature, we mention some basic aspects that we must consider when talking about couple relationships. The focus then falls on the concept of couple satisfaction, which we will see is defined as the emotional state of being satisfied with the interactions, experiences, and expectations in couple life - and on the association of this concept with several predictors: attachment style, gender, age, marital status and educational level.

In the methodology section, we have presented the research questions that guided us in this endeavour, as well as the hypotheses pursued in our research, and the instruments which we used to test these hypotheses, through our 153 respondents.

In our present research we aimed to analyse romantic relationships in general and focused our attention on predictors of couple satisfaction such as attachment style,

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gender, age, marital status and education level. We began by observing the relationship between attachment and couple satisfaction, finding that most participants with a secure attachment style also have high relationship satisfaction, as suggested by Kirkpartick et al. 1994, p. 1. When we investigated the association between couple satisfaction and participants' gender, we found that women are satisfied in the couple relationship, even though the literature consulted suggests that couple satisfaction is higher for men (Bühler et al., 2021, p. 8). We then noted that the highest proportion of those satisfied in the couple are young people aged 18-25 (Bühler et al., 2021, p. 26), unmarried people (Yap et al., 2012, p. 10), and people with higher education.

2. Literature overview

Romantic relationships are a central aspect of most people's lives. Research suggests that the satisfaction of romantic relationships is highly beneficial for well-being, health, and longevity.

Relationships are always situated at the intersections of different political and socio-cultural contexts. They are also experienced through every day, often mundane, interactions, gestures, and practices (Gabb and Fink, 2015, p.38). Close relationships in adulthood encompass patterns of cognitive, affective, and behavioural activities that occur within and between relational partners over time. These processes reflect the countless ways in which relationships are both enacted and sustained, and in which participants respond to them (Vangelisti & Perlman, 2018, p. 216).

Couple satisfaction is defined as an individual's emotional state of being satisfied with interactions, experiences, and expectations within couple life. Thus, individuals who experience happiness in their relationships with their partners also have a high emotional state of marital satisfaction, yet couple satisfaction is also influenced by how individuals perceive their partners and how they are perceived by their partners, Rusu & Mureşan (2014, p. 9) note.

Studies by Hazan & Shaver (1987, 1990), summarised by Kirkpatrick et al. (1994, p. 1), have shown that an individual's evaluation of his or her relationships is related to attachment styles in theoretically consistent ways. Individuals with a secure style report higher levels of satisfaction, intimacy, trust, and commitment in their relationships, whereas individuals with an avoidant style report lower level of these characteristics. Anxious partners report less satisfaction and more conflict and ambivalence.

Collins and Read's (1990) findings suggest that gender (male or female) moderates some of these associations. For men, security (i.e., comfort with closeness) was more predictive of positive relationships than was their level of anxious attachment (i.e., fear of abandonment), but for women the opposite was true: the more anxious the woman, the less satisfied and less confident she was.

A meta-analysis of gender differences in relationship satisfaction indicated that women are slightly less satisfied than men, summarises Bühler et al. (2021, p. 8). However, analyses showed that this difference was due to the inclusion of clinical samples, in which women were considerably less satisfied than men. Moreover, longitudinal studies have yielded inconsistent results on gender differences when it

comes to relationship satisfaction. Thus, it is crucial to consider gender as a moderator and test whether the development of relationship satisfaction differs between women and men.

According to the same meta-analysis conducted by Bühler et al. (2021, p. 26), relationship satisfaction declines from age 20 to 40, it reaches a very low point at age 40, then begins to rise until age 65 and reaches a saturation point at old age.

Married couples can differ from other couples in significant ways. For example, couples who marry are often characterised by higher levels of satisfaction and commitment compared to couples who do not marry, which may lead to a more favourable development of relationship satisfaction (Yap et al., 2012, p. 8).

The studies in the main stream literature, as far as we have been able to identify, focus their attention on the influence of differences in educational level between partners on couple satisfaction, as it is also evident from the idea put forward by Zhang (2022, p. 4), who argues that in couples with different levels of education there is a greater likelihood of experiencing divorce or separation, noting that when the wife has a higher level of education than her husband, there is a greater likelihood of divorce or separation.

3. Methodology

The research we conducted was a quantitative one using the questionnaire as research instrument. The period in which data was collected was 13.03.2023 – 23.03.2023 through a Google Forms survey. The identity of each participant was unknown and we did not require personal data such as name, email, phone number, place of employment, office or home address.

The objective of our research was to identify the relationships between couple satisfaction and a number of predictors of couple satisfaction: attachment style, gender, age, educational attainment, and marital status. Based on these, we also proposed the following research questions: Q1: To what extent does attachment style influence couple satisfaction?; Q2: What influence does participants' gender have on couple satisfaction?; Q3: What influence does participants' age have on couple satisfaction?; Q4: Does couple satisfaction differ according to marital status?; Q5: What influence does marital status have on couple satisfaction?

In this study, taking as a starting point the literature studied and the proposed research questions, we have stated a number of five research hypotheses. The first hypothesis, H1, assumes that attachment style influences couple satisfaction, in the sense that people with a secure attachment style are more satisfied with their couple relationship. The second hypothesis, H2, assumes that gender influences couple satisfaction, with women being less satisfied in their relationship than men. In the third hypothesis, H3, we assume that gender influences couple satisfaction, more specifically, the older individuals get, the lower their couple satisfaction becomes. The fourth hypothesis, H4, assumes that educational attainment influences couple satisfaction in that those with higher education will report lower couple satisfaction. The last hypothesis, H5, assumes that marital status influences couple satisfaction - married people have lower levels of satisfaction compared to unmarried people.

The questionnaire used in our study is composed of two subscales: the first is the ECR-R scale which assesses attachment style by completing a series of 42 items and from which 3 attachment styles result - anxious, secure and avoidant and the CSI scale which assesses the degree of satisfaction in the couple relationship by completing a series of 16 items and from which 2 satisfaction categories result - high degree of couple satisfaction and low degree of couple satisfaction.

The ECR-R Questionnaire - Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-Revised (Fraley et al., 2000) was originally developed by Brennan et al. (1998) as the basis of a large-scale factor analysis of all self-reported attachment measures in adults. A main analysis of more than 60 subscales revealed two major factors that were clearly interpreted as anxiety and avoidance. Therefore, Fraley et al. (2000) developed the ECR-R to improve the subsequent psychometric properties of the ECR. Thus, the ECR-R has become one of the most widely used scales to assess attachment anxiety and avoidance. It was based on measuring attachment anxiety and avoidance in romantic, self-reported relationships, but was later applied to other types of relationships. The ECR-R consists of short, specific questions directly targeting particular aspects of adult attachment, divided into the two main categories.

The CSI Questionnaire **-** Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI-16) is a 16-item measure designed to assess the relationship satisfaction of couples (married, living together or dating). The original version of the measure includes items designed to assess the presence of problems between individuals and the intensity of such problems.

In addition to this 16-item scale, there are two other versions of this measure: one containing 32 items and another with 4 items. This measure was designed to assess relationship satisfaction in couples (Funk & Rogge, 2007). The questionnaire can be completed in person or online. The CSI-16 consists of different response scales, including ordinal scales or Likert scales.

By completing the survey instruments online makes the sample highly feminised because women are more willing to answer such questionnaires than men. The sample consists of 153 respondents. The data obtained from the questionnaire was analysed using the IBM SPSS statistics software, using crosstabs function from the analyse menu.

4. Sample Description

Of the 153 participants in our research, 37.9% are male and 62.1% are female. Of the total participants, 33.3% are aged between 18 and 25, 32.7% are aged between 26 and 35, and 34% are over 35. In terms of marital status, 62.7% of the participants are single and 37.3% are married. 26.1% of the participants have secondary education (high school and post-secondary) and 73.9% have university education. In relation to attachment, we found that 21.6% of the participants have the anxious attachment style, 12.4% have the avoidant attachment style, and 66% have the secure attachment style. In terms of couple satisfaction, it is observed that 30.1% of the participants are dissatisfied in the couple relationship, while 69.9% of the participants are satisfied in the couple.

5. Results

In the association analysis between attachment style and couple satisfaction, we identified that 51.5% of subjects with anxious attachment are satisfied with the couple relationship, 94.7% of those with avoidant attachment are dissatisfied in the relationship, and 88.1% of those with secure attachment are satisfied in the relationship. Based on the association coefficient phi = 0.621 a strong association relationship was found between the two variables. We can thus say that hypothesis H1 (attachment style influences couple satisfaction, in the sense that people with a secure attachment style are more satisfied with their couple relationship) is confirmed.

Table 1

Association between attachment style and couple satisfaction

Attachment		Couple satisfaction		Total
	Number	Dissatisfaction	Satisfaction	
Anxious		16	17	33
	% of attachment	48.5%	51.5%	100.00%
Avoidant	Number	18	1	19
	% of attachment	94.7%	5.3%	100.00%
Secure	Number	2	89	101
	% of attachment	11.9%	88.1%	100.00%
Total		46	107	153
	% of attachment	30.1%	69.9%	100.0%

Analysing the association between participants' gender and relationship satisfaction, we found that 63.8% of men were satisfied in their relationship, compared to 73.7% of women who are satisfied in their relationship, as revealed in Table 2. This disproves our hypothesis H2 (gender influences couple satisfaction, thus women being less satisfied in relationship compared to men). But the coefficient phi=0.105 shows a weak association between the two variables.

Table 2

Association between respondents' gender and couple satisfaction

Gender		Couple satisfaction		Total
	Number	Dissatisfaction	Satisfaction	
Male		21	37	58
	% of the gender	36.2%	63.8%	100.0%
Female	Number	25	70	95
	% of the gender	26.3%	73.7%	100.0%
Total	Number	46	107	153
	% of the gender	30.1%	69.9%	100.0%

Hypothesis H3 was tested by associating the age of participants with couple satisfaction and we found that 76.5% of participants aged between 18 and 25 are satisfied in the couple relationship, while 66% of those aged between 26 and 35 are satisfied in the couple relationship and 67.3% of participants over 35 are satisfied in the relationship (Table 3). These data seem to confirm hypothesis H3 (age influences couple satisfaction, i.e., the older individuals get, the lower their couple satisfaction). However, phi=0.101 shows a weak association between the two variables.

Associating education level with relationship satisfaction, see Table 4, the analysis reveals that 52.5% of participants with secondary education are satisfied in the relationship and 76.1% of participants with higher education are satisfied in the relationship, which means that hypothesis H4, which assumes that education level influences couple satisfaction in the sense that those with higher education will report lower satisfaction in the couple relationship, is invalidated. The coefficient phi=0.226 shows, however, a rather weak association of the variables.

Table 3

Association between age of participants and couple satisfaction

Age		Couple satisfaction		Total
	Number	Dissatisfaction	Satisfaction	Total
18-25		12	39	51
	% of age	23.5%	76.5%	100.00%
26-35	Number	17	33	50
	% of age	34.0%	66.0%	100.00%
Over 35	Number	17	35	52
	% of age	32.7%	67.3%	100.00%
Total	Number	46	107	153
	% of age	30.1%	69.9%	100.0%

Table 4

Association between educational attainment and couple satisfaction

Level of studies		Couple satisfaction		Total
	Number	Dissatisfaction	Satisfaction	Total
Secondary education		19	21	40
	% of education level	47.5%	52.5%	100.00%
Higher education	Number	27	86	113
	% of education level	23.9%	76.1%	100.00%
Total	Number	46	107	153
	% of education level	30.1%	69.9%	100.00%

A weak negative association, phi=-0.055 is found between marital status and relationship satisfaction, and the association between these variables shows that: 71.9%

of unmarried individuals are satisfied in their relationship and 66.7% of married ones are satisfied in their relationship. From these results we can see that hypothesis H5, which assumes that marital status influences couple satisfaction - married people have lower satisfaction levels compared to unmarried people, is confirmed.

6. Conclusions

As expected, we found the presence of association relationships between couple satisfaction and several predictors of couple satisfaction: attachment style, age, education level and marital status. After performing statistical analyses, we were able to observe how these associations manifest themselves. People with a secure attachment style have increased couple relationship satisfaction, whereas people with an avoidant attachment style are dissatisfied in the relationship, and thus our first hypothesis that people with a secure attachment style are satisfied in the couple relationship is confirmed. This hypothesis supports the findings made by Kirkpatrick and collaborators in 1994. Subsequently, we observed that women are more satisfied in the couple relationship compared to men, which disproves our second hypothesis that women are less satisfied in the couple than men (Bühler et al., 2021, p. 8). When we examined the association of couple satisfaction with age, it resulted that couple satisfaction is lower with advancing age, confirming the third hypothesis, which proposes: the older the age, the lower the couple satisfaction (Bühler et al., 2021, p. 27). Again, the analyses show that people with higher education are more satisfied with the couple relationship compared to people with secondary education, which means that our fourth hypothesis is invalidated, which suggests that those with higher education have a lower level of couple satisfaction. Finally, we observed that unmarried people have higher couple satisfaction than married people, confirming hypothesis 5 which argues that married people have a lower level of couple satisfaction compared to unmarried people - also supported by Yap et al. (2012, p. 8).

As limitations of our research, it is necessary to mention a higher proportion of women participating in the study, which is due to the increased willingness of women to respond to online questionnaires.

As future research directions we can think of continuing this study by looking at couple satisfaction among much older people, over 65 years old, who, according to findings by Bühler et al. 2021, p. 27, would have higher couple relationship satisfaction compared to middle-aged adults (40-65 years).

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