

Relationship between Perfectionism and Marital Satisfaction among Graduate Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the relationship between self-perfectionism, dyadic perfectionism, and marital satisfaction among graduate students. Respondents were recruited based on purposive sampling. A total of 30 graduate students participated in the study. The result shows that dyadic perfectionism is significantly correlated with marital satisfaction in a negative direction. Respondents who hold high standard and high discrepancy to their partner tend to be less satisfied in their marriage. Implication to counselling service is discussed.

Keywords: self-perfectionism, dyadic perfectionism, marital satisfaction, graduate students

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Graduate education is a double-ended sword to marriage. It is essential to cope with career demand that leading to financial stability in a marriage (Gold, 2006). It could also act as a stressor in a marital relationship. In a symmetrical marriage whereby both of the couple are pursuing their study at the present time, they tend to have more stable and satisfied marital relation (Scheinkman, 1988). On the other hand, in an asymmetrical marriage whereby one is student and another is working, the inequality between them and the contextual gap difference exert intense confusion and stress on the couple (Scheinkman, 1988). Graduate students who are married experience emotional estrangement from families and they are anxious about finances, time spend together, and lack of intimacy (Gonzalez et al., 2001; Katz, Monnier, Libet, Shaw, & Beach, 2000). Hence, the opportunity cost of graduate education to marital relationship is not only the financial aspects, but also the emotional and relational aspects.

Marital satisfaction is an important component in a marital relationship. It is a relationship quality index that reflects the discrepancy between one's expectation and reality to his/her spouse (Chen & Li, 2012; Hsiao & Li, 2009). It also indicates one's attraction to the marital relationship (Johnson, Caughlin, & Huston, 1999). There are ten core areas in a marriage, namely personality, communication, conflict resolution, partner style and habits, financial management, leisure activities, sexual expectancies, family and friends, roles and responsibilities, and spiritual beliefs (Olson & Larson, 2008).

One of the predictors of marital satisfaction is perfectionism (Arcuri, 2013; Kim, 2008; Shea, Slaney, & Rice, 2006). Perfectionism has been defined by the pioneers in the perfectionism research from different perspectives. Hewitt and Fleet categorized perfectionism based on its attribution, i.e. self-oriented perfectionism, other-oriented perfectionism, and socially prescribe perfectionism (Hewitt, Fleet, Turnbull-Donovan, & Mikail, 1991). Self-oriented perfectionism refers to the attribution of perfectionism characteristics to oneself. People with high self-oriented perfectionism would experience "high and/or unrealistic expectation for themselves; strikes compulsively toward their goals; experience little satisfaction; avoid things that can't be done well; engage in self-punishment and self-criticism" (Hewitt & Fleet, 2004, p.3). Other-oriented perfectionism refers to the attribution of perfectionism characteristics to other. People who have high other-oriented perfectionism would have "very high and/or unrealistic expectations for others; expects others to strive compulsively; hostile; authoritarian; dominating, motivated by a need to reduce others' worth, thereby elevating their self-worth" (Hewitt & Fleet, 2004, p.3). Socially-prescribed perfectionism refers to the attribution of perfectionism characteristics by society. People who have high socially-prescribe perfectionism would "perceive others want them to be perfect; self-worth depends on meeting these expectations; making mistakes is highly unacceptable; have marked fear of rejection and fears of looking foolish" (Hewitt & Fleet, 2004, p.3).

Frost, Marten, Lahart, and Rosenblate (1990) defined perfectionism as a constituent of five dimensions, namely concern over mistake, personal standard, parental expectation, doubt about action, and organization. Concern over mistake refers to "negative reactions to mistakes, a tendency to interpret mistakes as equivalent to failure, and a tendency to believe that one will lose the respect of others following failure" (p.453). Personal standard refers to "setting of very high standard and

the excessive importance place on these high standards for self-evaluation” (p.453). Parental expectation refers to “the tendency to believe one’s parent set very high goals and are overly critical” (p.453). Doubt about action refers to “the tendency to feel that projects are not completed to satisfaction” (p.453). Organization refers to “emphasis on the important of and preference for order” (p.453).

Slaney, Rice, Mobley, Trippi, and Ashby (2001) capture the adaptive and maladaptive element of perfectionism by using three dimensions, namely high standard, orderliness, and discrepancy of expectation and achievement. The high standard refers to holding extremely high performance expectations for oneself. Orderliness refers to preference to be orderly and organized. Discrepancy refers to the “perceived discrepancy or difference between standards one has for oneself and one’s actual performance” (p.133). Initially, high standard and orderliness was classified as adaptive perfectionism while discrepancies was classified as maladaptive perfectionism. However, later research found that only high standard and discrepancy need to be included to capture adaptive and maladaptive perfectionism respectively (Rice & Ashby, 2007). Using Slaney et al. (2001) model of perfectionism as a blueprint, Shea, Slaney and Rice (2006) extended it from individual to dyadic perfectionism, i.e. the perfectionism characteristics that one hold to his/her partner. Among the three definitions of perfectionism above mentioned, Slaney et al. (2001) model of perfectionism is well-fitted into the context of current study, from the counselling research and practice perspective.

Marital research shows that perfectionism is one of the predictors of marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction is negatively influenced by self-perfectionism (Fleet, Hewitt, Shapiro, & Rayman, 2001; Haring, Hewitt, & Fleet, 2003; Kim, 2008). Based on Hewitt and Fleet model of perfectionism, it was found that one who has high socially prescribed perfectionism is more likely to have low adjustment among dating couples (Fleet, et al., 2001), low marital adjustment (Haring, et al., 2003) and marital satisfaction (Kim, 2008) among married couples. The Actor-Partner Independence Model Analysis shows that socially prescribed perfectionism predicts not only own marital adjustment, but also predicts partner’s marital adjustment (Haring, et al., 2003). Interestingly, self-oriented perfectionism is negatively related with marital satisfaction when the neuroticism is controlled, but it positively related with marital satisfaction when neuroticism is not controlled (Kim, 2008). Therefore, we hypothesized that self-perfectionism is related with marital satisfaction.

As for the relationship between dyadic perfectionism and marital satisfaction, one who has high discrepancy is more likely to have low marital satisfaction (Arcuri, 2013; Shea, et al., 2006). One who has high expectation to partner is more likely to have low relationship satisfaction among dating couples (Stoeber, 2012). Therefore, we hypothesized that dyadic perfectionism is related with marital satisfaction.

2.0 RESEARCH AIM

This study aims to describe the relationship between perfectionism and marital satisfaction among graduate students. The result will be helpful to develop intervention strategies in counselling to promote marital wellness among graduate students.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The research design is determined based on its research purpose and data collection method (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010). From the research purpose perspective, the correlational research design was used to describe the relationship between perfectionism and marital satisfaction among graduate students. From the data collection method perspective, it was a survey research as the data was collected by using self-report questionnaire, which provides greater anonymity and cost effective (Rozumah & Nor Sheereen, 2006). Therefore, this was a correlational, survey research.

3.2 Research Sample

The research sample was selected based on purposive sampling in achieving the research aim. The inclusion criteria are: (i) graduate students, (ii) Malaysian, and (iii) married. A total of 30 graduate students from a local university in Selangor, Malaysia were recruited to participate in the research. The respondents aged between 25 to 45 years old ($M=34.52$, $SD=6.63$). 70% of the respondents are female ($n=21$) and 30% of them are male ($n=9$). Based on the ethnicity, 90% of the respondents are Malay ($n=27$), 6.7% of them are Indian ($n=2$), and 3.3% of them are Chinese ($n=1$). Based on the study program, 70% of the respondents are master students ($n=21$) and 30% of them are doctoral students ($n=9$).

3.3 Measures

3.31 Sociodemographic Information

Personal information such as age, gender, race, and graduate program were provided by respondents. This information is helpful to readers to have some basic understanding about the respondents' characteristics.

3.32 Almost Perfect Scale-Revised

Almost Perfect Scale-Revised (APS-R) was used to measure self-perfectionism (Slaney, et al., 2001). The high standard and discrepancy subscales were used to measure one's tendency of perfectionism toward oneself. The self-high standard subscale consists of seven items (e.g. I try to do my best at everything I do). The self-discrepancy subscale consists of 12 items (e.g. Doing my best never seems to be enough). The response format is 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). Literatures reported that its reliability is high (Slaney, et al., 2001; Wong, Chan, & Lau, 2010). In this study, the internal consistency is $\alpha=.78$ for self-high standard subscale and $\alpha=.91$ for self-discrepancy subscale.

3.32 Dyadic Almost Perfect Scale

Dyadic Almost Perfect Scale (DAPS) was used to measure dyadic perfectionism (Shea, et al., 2006). The high standard and discrepancy subscales were used to measure one's tendency of perfectionism toward his/her partner. The dyadic high standard subscale consists of six items (e.g. I expect the best from my partner). The dyadic discrepancy subscale consists of 16 items (e.g. I am rarely satisfied with my partner's accomplishments). The response format is 7-point Likert scale

(1=strongly disagree, 7=strongly agree). It consists of three negative items and these items were reverse-coded in computing the total score for each subscale. Literatures reported that its reliability is high (Shea, et al., 2006). In this study, the internal consistency is $\alpha=.88$ for dyadic high standard subscale and $\alpha=.91$ for dyadic discrepancy subscale.

3.33 ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale

ENRICH (Evaluation and Nurturing Relationship Issues, Communication and Happiness) Marital Satisfaction Scale was used to measure marital satisfaction (Olson & Larson, 2008). It measures the satisfaction in ten areas of marriage, namely personality, role responsibilities, communication, conflict resolution, financial concerns, management of leisure time, sexual relationship, parental responsibilities, relationships with family and friends, and religious orientation. It consists of 10 items (e.g. I am very happy with how we handle role responsibilities in our marriage). The response format is 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). It consists of five negative items and these items were reverse-coded in computing the total score. ENRICH has good psychometrically properties, it has (i) high concurrent validity with Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test, (ii) high discriminant validity to discriminant the stressed and non-stressed couples, (iii) good test-retest reliability of .86, and (iv) good internal consistency reliability of .82 (Olson & Larson, 2008). In this study, the internal consistency is $\alpha=.72$.

4.0 FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Preliminary Analysis

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics of the variables understudied. The mean, standard deviation, and score range were calculated. The normality of distribution was examined using skewness and kurtosis prior to the inferential statistical testing. Skewness refers to the asymmetrical distribution of the variable, a positive skewed distribution refers that most of the scores are below the mean and a negative skewed distribution refers that most of the scores are above the mean (Kline, 2005; Weston & Gore, 2006). Kurtosis refers to the peak and tails of distribution, a positive kurtosis is a very peaked distribution with fewer outliers while a negative kurtosis is a very flat distribution with many outliers (Weston & Gore, 2006). A distribution is considered normal when its skewness is between -2 to +2 and kurtosis is between -2 to +2 (Garson, 2012). It is concluded that these variables have approximately normal distribution, thus Pearson's product moment correlation was used to analyse the relationship between self-perfectionism, dyadic perfectionism, and marital satisfaction.

Table 1. Mean Scores, Standard Deviation, and Score Range for All Scales

Measures	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Range
Almost Perfect Scale-Revised					
Self-High Standard	39.63	4.52	-.37	-.81	7-49
Self-Discrepancy	52.73	12.28	-1.01	.14	12-84
Dyadic Almost Perfect Scale					
Dyadic-High Standard	30.63	12.27	-.77	.74	6-42
Dyadic-Discrepancy	61.33	5.85	.22	.33	16-112
ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale	32.33	5.70	-.35	1.25	10-50

4.2 Correlation between self-perfectionism, dyadic perfectionism, and marital satisfaction

Table 2 presents the Correlation Coefficient in testing the relationship between self-perfectionism, dyadic perfectionism, and marital satisfaction. The result shows that only dyadic perfectionism is related with marital satisfaction, in a negative direction. Specifically, individuals who hold high standard towards partner are more likely to be less satisfied in their marriage ($r = -.50, p < .01$). Also, individuals who have high discrepancy between expectation and the actual performance of partner is more likely to be less satisfied in their marriage ($r = -.50, p < .01$).

Table 2. Correlation between Self-perfectionism, Dyadic Perfectionism, and Marital Satisfaction

Measures	1	2	3	4	5
1. Marital Satisfaction	1				
Self-Perfectionism					
2. Self-High Standard	-.12	1			
3. Self-Discrepancy	-.12	.00	1		
Dyadic Perfectionism					
4. Dyadic-High Standard	-.50**	.60**	.20		
5. Dyadic-Discrepancy	-.50**	.06	.38*	.43*	1

Note. ** $p < .01$ level, * $p < .05$

5.0 CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

Result shows that dyadic perfectionism is related with marital satisfaction among graduate students. This is consistent with previous literature (Arcuri, 2013; Shea, et al., 2006; Stoeber, 2012). One shall be aware on how his/her own expectation and the critical evaluation of the partner performance could be a threat in marriage. Interestingly, in contrast to the literature, there is an insignificant relationship between self-perfectionism and marital satisfaction. It suggests that the perfectionism that one hold for partner is more 'influential' in 'determining' the marital satisfaction.

As for the implication, the knowledge on the relationship between perfectionism and marital satisfaction could help counselors in case management. The relationship pattern will be useful to develop intervention strategies to promote marital satisfaction wellness. For example, the

counselors can explore and intervene on the expectation and the discrepancy that one hold for his/her partner. Also, psychoeducation can be conducted on the influence of perfectionism on marital satisfaction, setting of realistic expectation, and be flexible in making an evaluation on partner. Individual counseling, couple counseling, family counseling, and support-group could be arranged to address the specific needs of the married postgraduates and their families.

The study has three limitations. First, the 'relationship' between dyadic perfectionism and marital satisfaction does not suggest the any causality effect. Secondly, the data were collected based on self-reported questionnaire. There were possibility of social desirability effects and the respondents' genuine response is the paramount for meaningful data. Thirdly, the respondents were recruited by using purposive sampling, it may not be representative of the greater population. Readers should be aware in evaluating the similarities between the target groups and the respondents in the research should they want to generalize the finding to other groups. A random sampling would be recommended for future research in ensuring the generalizability.

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