



Original Research

Dispositional Gratitude and Marriage Satisfaction

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Abstract

Little is known about gratitude in the context of marriage satisfaction. Therefore, the Gratitude, Resentment and Appreciation Test (GRAT), which is used to measure dispositional gratitude, and the Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI) were utilized to measure individuals' satisfaction in relationships. Results from a sample of married adults suggested there was a positive relationship between dispositional gratitude and marriage satisfaction. Gender, however, was not found to be a moderating factor. Therefore, it may be useful for married couples to further explore expressions of gratitude and appreciation because they appear to be equally valued by both genders.

Keywords: Marriage, Satisfaction, Gratitude

Introduction

It is no secret that separation and divorce rates are high in the US: In 2018 around 2.1 million couples were married. Around 782,000 of these couples divorced or annulled their marriages within that same year [1]. Dissolution of marriage is problematic due to divorce leading to psychological distress, loneliness, and many other challenges [2]. This has implications for divorcee's mental and physical well-being. Luo et al. [3] found that as loneliness increased, depression increased while self-reported health and physical limitations decreased.

Divorce is not inevitability, however, and it is important to understand the factors that we have the power to change with targeted intervention. One such factor is gratitude—the tendency to appreciate the positive other's bring to one's life—which promotes relational satisfaction [4]. Additionally, interventions designed to facilitate gratitude have gained popularity and the resulting research is promising: Both receptivity and expression of gratitude can be increased with therapeutic intervention [5,6]. This is important as it seems marital satisfaction and reduced marital conflicts are two of the most important components in a stable marriage [7]. Therefore, it is important to better understand the relationship between marital satisfaction and gratitude.

Dispositional Gratitude

While we all have fleeting moments of gratitude, some of us are more likely to feel, express, and be receptive to gratitude than others. Research suggests that dispositional gratitude—the tendency to be aware of and respond to others with gratitude across time and in different contexts—is enduring and predicts higher levels of positive emotions and life satisfaction [8]. We make the distinction both for research and clinical purposes. We chose to measure dispositional

gratitude because survey-based results are less likely to vary based on respondent state when taking the survey. Further, though more difficult to target in therapeutic contexts, traits can be impacted by targeted intervention, changes that are often maintained over time. Take, for example, a married couple comprised of one introvert and one extrovert. Over time and exposure to the other person, the introvert would be likely to shift towards extroversion while the extrovert might shift towards introversion. Thus, ascertaining the impact of dispositional gratitude likely has farther reaching implications than it's more variable counterpart, state-gratitude.

Relational Satisfaction and Gratitude

Dispositional gratitude is relevant to interpersonal relationships because those who are grateful more of the time (i.e. higher in dispositional gratitude) tend to be more content with what they have and appreciate simple pleasures as opposed to striving for more [9]. Therefore, they are less likely to take a "grass is greener" approach and be content with themselves and their partners. Further, those high in dispositional gratitude are more likely to acknowledge how other people benefit them; they even go one-step further and are more likely to voice their appreciation than their less-grateful counterparts [9].

Lambert and Fincham [10] go a step further, taking into consideration the impact of feeling grateful more of the time and the expression of that gratitude. They that found people who expressed gratitude directly to their partner both thought more highly of their significant other and were more comfortable communicating with the other person, whether they were voicing appreciation or concerns. This finding held up over time and drives home a well-known point: Communication is key. Expressing gratitude may be a pathway to effective communication.

Now that we have begun to see the importance of gratitude expression, we must also consider the other side of dispositional gratitude: How open someone is to receiving such expressions, or gratitude receptivity. Lambert and colleagues [11] lend some insight into the role of both gratitude expression and receptivity in close relationships (friendly or romantic). They surveyed 137 participants who were involved in a romantic relationship or a close friendship to ascertain whether the expression and perception of gratitude impacted self-reported responsiveness to friend/partner's needs. They found that both gratitude and responsiveness to needs was desirable in relationships. Additionally, with increased expression of gratitude over time, both the perception that the other person was grateful and communal strength become stronger in a relationship. Adding insight into our conceptualization of what promotes gratitude, the researchers also found that romantic attraction and commitment to the relationship were predictors of increased gratitude expression [11].

Algoe et al. [5] further explored the importance of gratitude receptivity in relationships. In a study of committed partners who had been together for 6-months or longer, the researchers found that gratitude receptivity positively correlated with future relationship satisfaction. Those who were more receptive to expressions of gratitude at baseline rated their relationships as more satisfying 6-months later. Expressions of gratitude also predicted changes in recipient relational satisfaction, indicating that gratitude receptivity has long-term implications for marital satisfaction.

Perceived gratitude, how grateful someone perceives someone else to be, is a final component of gratitude that is relevant to relational satisfaction and helping behaviors within relationships. Kindt et al. [12] examined the relationship between partner willingness to help with daily tasks and how grateful they perceived their partners (the recipient of helping behaviors) to be in a sample of couples where one partner experienced chronic pain. Kindt et al. [12] measured baseline relationship quality, willingness to help partners in daily activities, and how grateful they perceived their partners to be (perceived gratitude). Results indicated that on days where partners helped their significant others out of enjoyment (as opposed to obligation) they concurrently rated their partners as more grateful. They then were also more likely to engage in helping behaviors for their partners on the following day. This suggests daily helping behaviors may be reinforced if a partner thinks their significant other appreciates them, a pattern of behavior likely to result in increased marital satisfaction [13].

Given the likely relationship between gratitude and marital satisfaction and related clinical applicability, we wanted to know whether dispositional gratitude predicts marriage satisfaction in a sample of married adults who had been married for longer than one-year. Thus, it was hypothesized that there is a relationship between dispositional gratitude and marriage satisfaction in these couples.

Methodology

Data was collected from 189 participants (81% female, 19% male). The majority of the participants self-identified as White (95%) and had an individual annual income \geq \$25,000

(75%). Forty-three percent of participants reported having earned a Bachelor's degree or higher. The majority of participants were married $>$ 5 years (68%) and had not been married prior to the current marital relationship (86%). Around 77% of participants had at least one child at the time of the study. Although a number of religious, spiritual, and nonbelieving options were offered, the majority (44%) identified with Christianity.

To be eligible for this study, participants had to be \geq 18 years of age, able to read and comprehend 8th grade English, engaged in heterosexual relationships, and currently married \geq 1 year. Participants were recruited online through social media as a sample of convenience and directed to a link for more information. The link included an informed consent form, demographic questionnaires, and instruments regarding dispositional gratitude and marital satisfaction. Upon completion, participants were provided a debriefing form.

Measures

Gratitude: The Gratitude Resentment and Appreciation Test (GRAT-Revised) is a 16-item self-report measure designed to measure dispositional gratitude. Response parameters were measured on a 9-point Likert-type scale in from 1 (I strongly disagree) to 9 (I strongly agree). Composite scores were calculated by averaging case scores, resulting in a possible range of scores between 1 and 9; Higher scores indicated greater levels of dispositional gratitude. The GRAT-Revised has strong predictive validity [9]. Reliability analyses revealed this measure to be sufficiently reliable ($\alpha = 0.76$) in this study.

Marriage Satisfaction: The Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI) was utilized to measure one's satisfaction in a relationship [14]. Response parameters were measured on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 6 (completely true). Composite scores were calculated by averaging case scores across CSI items, resulting in a possible range of scores between 1 and 6; Higher scores indicated greater marriage satisfaction. The composite scores were used as the criterion variable in regression and moderated regression analyses. These indexes have demonstrated strong convergent validity with other measures of satisfaction, and construct validity with anchor scales. Reliability analyses in this study revealed the CSI to be reliable ($\alpha = 0.97$).

Results

Inferential statistics were used to draw conclusions from the data collected. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS; Version 23.0) was used to code and tabulate scores collected from the survey and provide summarized values, when applicable, including mean and standard deviation. Regression and moderated regression analyses were used to evaluate the research. The research question was: Is there a relationship between marriage satisfaction and dispositional gratitude? The null hypothesis (H_0) was: There is no relationship between marriage satisfaction and dispositional gratitude.

Prior to analysis, data cleaning and data screening were undertaken to ensure the variables of interest met appropriate statistical assumptions. Subsequently, regression and

moderated regression analyses were run to determine if a significant relationship existed between marriage satisfaction and dispositional gratitude and whether the relationship was moderated by gender. The criterion variable was participants' marriage satisfaction as measured by the CSI. The predictor variable was participants' dispositional gratitude scores as measured by the GRAT-Revised [9]. The composite scores were used as the predictor variable in regression and moderated regression analyses. The moderating variable was participants' sex (male, female).

Data cleaning

Data were collected from a valid sample of 189 married adults living in the American Midwest. Before the research question was evaluated, the data were screened for missing

data, univariate outliers, reliability, normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Missing data were investigated using frequency counts and no cases were found to exist. The distributions were evaluated for univariate outliers and one case was found and removed from the analyses. Therefore, a valid sample of 188 participants was used in the regression and moderated regression analyses (N=188). Descriptive statistics of participants' gratitude and marriage satisfaction scores by gender are displayed in Table 1.

Reliability analyses of the criterion (marriage satisfaction) and predictor (gratitude) variables revealed that both variable constructs were sufficiently reliable ($\alpha > 0.70$). Displayed in Table 2 are summary statistics of the reliability analyses conducted on the dependent variables.

Variable	<i>n</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skewness	Kurtosis
Female							
Gratitude	152	4.880	8.500	7.315	0.770	-0.515	-0.309
Marriage satisfaction	152	2.000	6.000	4.892	0.968	-1.070	0.302
Male							
Gratitude	36	5.690	8.500	7.102	0.700	-0.071	-0.497
Marriage satisfaction	36	3.000	6.000	4.902	0.833	-0.510	-0.753
Overall							
Gratitude	188	4.880	8.500	7.275	0.760	-0.418	-0.420
Marriage satisfaction	188	2.000	6.000	4.894	0.941	-1.001	0.219

Note: *N* = 188.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of participants' gratitude and marriage satisfaction scores by gender.

Linearity and homoscedasticity were evaluated using scatterplots and no violations were observed. Based on the evaluation of the z-skew and z-kurtosis coefficients, the criterion variable (marriage satisfaction) exceeded the critical skew range ($z\text{-skew} < -3.29$). Although the distributions were significantly skewed, in conjunction with the central limit theorem [15,16] posited that when a sample size exceeds 100, statistical tests that use the general linear model, such as ANOVA and regression/correlation analysis, are robust against violations of normality. Therefore, normality was conditionally assumed for the significantly skewed distributions and the violations were considered a limitation of the study. Displayed in Table 3 are skewness and kurtosis statistics of participant gratitude and marriage satisfaction scores by gender.

Results of the Regression Analysis

Using SPSS 23.0, regression analyses were conducted to determine if a significant relationship existed between participants' marriage satisfaction and dispositional gratitude scores. Results indicated that a significant, positive relationship existed between the criterion and predictor

variables, $R=0.367$, $R^2 = 0.135$, $F(1,186) = 28.979$, $p<0.001$. That is, 13.5% ($R^2 = 0.135$) of the variance observed in the criterion variable was due to the predictor variable. Thus, H_0 was rejected in favor of H_a . Displayed in Table 4 is a model summary of the regression analysis conducted to explore the research question. In addition, Figure 1 in Appendix A displays a scatterplot of participants' gratitude and marriage satisfaction scores.

Results of the Moderated Regression Analysis

A post-hoc moderated regression analysis was conducted to determine if the relationship between participants' marriage satisfaction and dispositional gratitude scores was significantly moderated by sex (male, female). Results indicated that the relationship between the criterion and predictor variables was not significantly moderated by sex ($\Delta R^2 = 0.002$, $\Delta F(1,184) = 0.456$, $p=0.500$). That is, the relationship between female participants' marriage satisfaction and gratitude scores was significantly similar compared to the male participants' relationship between criterion and predictor variables. Displayed in Table 5 is a summary of the moderated regression analysis conducted for

the research question. Furthermore, displayed in Appendix B, and marriage satisfaction scores by gender. Figure 2 is a scatterplot of participant dispositional gratitude

Variable	# of items	Cronbach's alpha (α)
Gratitude	16	0.760
Marriage satisfaction	15	0.969

Note: $N = 189$

Table 2: Summary of reliability analyses conducted on the dependent variables.

Variable	n	Skewness	Skew SE	z-skew	Kurtosis	Kurtosis SE	z-kurtosis
Female							
Gratitude	152	-0.515	0.197	-2.614	-0.309	0.391	-0.790
Marriage satisfaction	152	-1.070	0.197	-5.431	0.302	0.391	0.772
Male							
Gratitude	36	-0.071	0.393	-0.181	-0.497	0.768	-0.647
Marriage satisfaction	36	-0.510	0.393	-1.298	-0.753	0.768	-0.980
Overall							
Gratitude	188	-0.418	0.177	-2.362	-0.420	0.353	-1.190
Marriage satisfaction	188	-1.001	0.177	-5.655	0.219	0.353	0.620

Note. $N = 188$

Table 3: Skewness and kurtosis statistics of participants' gratitude and marriage satisfaction scores by gender.

Source	R	R^2	SE	F	$df1$	$df2$	Sig. (p)
Omnibus	0.367	0.135	0.878	28.979	1	186	< .001
Unstandardized coefficients				Standardized coefficients			
Source	B	SE	β	t	Sig. (p)	r_{partial}	
(Constant)	1.585	0.618		2.565	0.011		
Gratitude	0.455	0.084	0.367	5.383	<0.001	0.367	

Note. Criterion variable = marriage satisfaction, $N = 188$.

Table 4: Model summary of the regression analysis.

Source	R	ΔR^2	SE	ΔF	$df1$	$df2$	$\Delta \text{Sig. } (p)$
Model 1	0.370	0.137	0.879	14.662	2	185	< .001
Model 2	0.373	0.002	0.881	0.456	1	184	0.500
Unstandardized coefficients				Standardized coefficients			
Source	B	SE	β	t	Sig. (p)	r_{partial}	
Model 1							
(Constant)	1.411	0.673		2.098	0.037		

Gratitude	0.461	0.085		0.372	5.415	<0.001	0.370
Gender	0.108	0.164		0.045	0.658	0.511	0.045
Model 2							
(Constant)	2.714	2.043			1.328	0.186	
Gratitude	0.279	0.283		0.225	0.989	0.324	0.068
Gender	-1.010	1.664		-0.423	-0.607	0.545	-0.042
Interaction	0.157	0.232		0.478	0.675	0.500	0.046

Note: Criterion variable = marriage satisfaction; interaction = gratitude. *N* = 188.

Table 5: Summary of moderated multiple regression analysis.

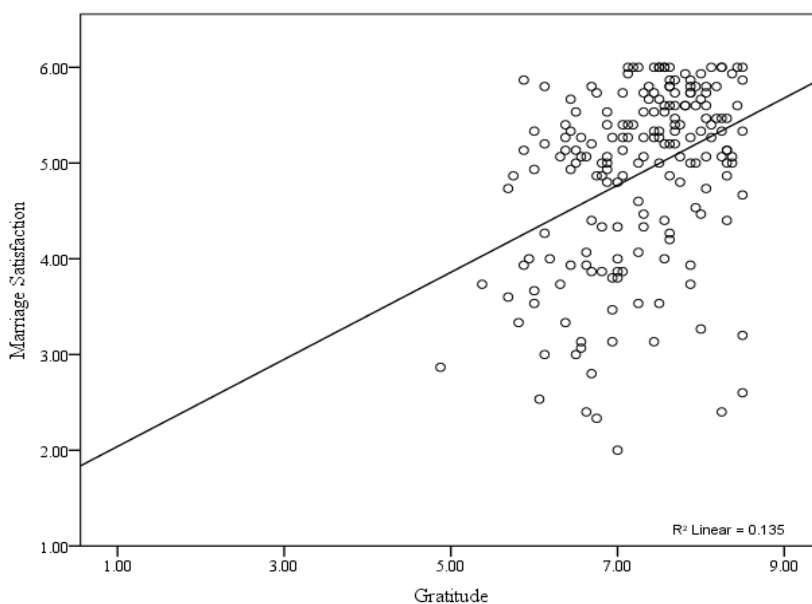


Figure 1: Scatterplot of all participants' gratitude and marriage satisfaction scores.

Appendix B

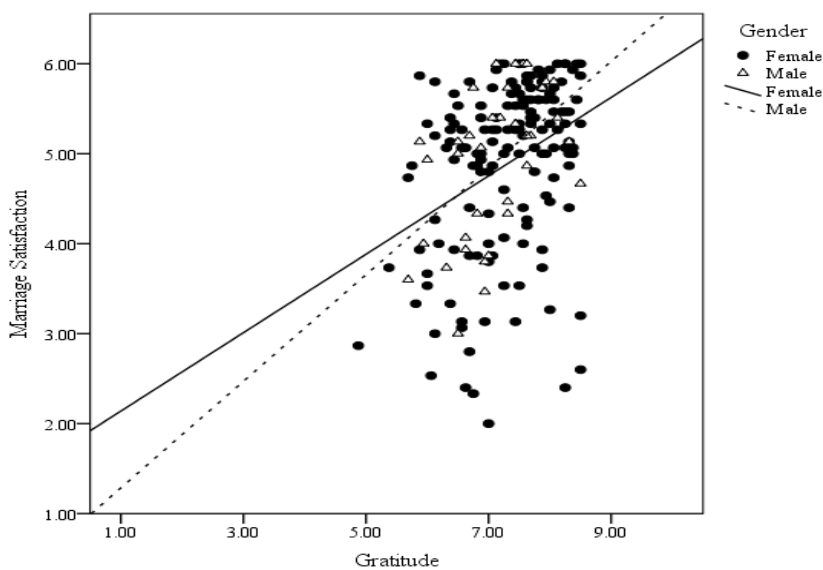


Figure 2: Scatterplot of participants' gratitude and marriage satisfaction scores by gender.

Discussion

Findings indicate that dispositional gratitude predicted marriage satisfaction within our sample. However, this finding was not significantly moderated by sex (male, female). Therefore, the relationship between female participants' marriage satisfaction and gratitude scores was similar to male participants' relationship between criterion and predictor variables. The findings are consistent with past results indicating a positive relationship between gratitude and marriage satisfaction and go one step further to examine the predictive capacity of gratitude on marital satisfaction [4,5,11,12]. Further, results suggest that this may apply to females and males—an important finding given women tend to score higher on gratitude scales [17] and men have reported less benefit from gratitude-based interventions targeting other factors (i.e. self-esteem & affect; [13,18]).

The findings might be explained by basic a tenant of social exchange theory: "Reward/cost outcomes" play a critical role in marital satisfaction ([19] p. 404). To better explain, within any relationship there is give and take of both tangibles (i.e. resources, gifts) and intangibles (i.e. physical touch, affirmations, quality time) that acts like the balance in a bank—when a partner gives something to the relationship, there is then more available that they can take. Married couples report greater satisfaction when the benefits and costs are perceived as equal (as opposed to actually being equal, an important distinction to be explained momentarily) between the pair. However, positive interactions need to outweigh the negative in order for the theoretical bank balance to be perceived as neutral. This may be partially explained by the human tendency to over attend to negative stimuli. "Bad [is] stronger than good", a tendency that spans many psychological processes (i.e. memory, attention) and applies to interpersonal relationships [20,21p. 19].

This implicates gratitude as a useful intervention point. Within a therapeutic setting, positive interactions can be taught, practiced, and generalized to facilitate greater marriage satisfaction [19]. Due to the gratitude likely leading to increased marriage satisfaction and being teachable, it stands to reason that deliberately facilitating gratitude in a therapeutic setting might help increase marriage satisfaction [6]. This may be especially powerful if people are instructed to direct their attention to what they are grateful for about their partners. Deliberate, mindful attention turned to positive aspects of a relationship may counteract the over attention so often given to the negative as introduced earlier. In fact, the benefits of mindfulness partnered with gratitude are a collaboration already being researched and showing promising results [22]. Future research might further explore how these facets work together to promote satisfaction within relationships and how this might be applied in therapeutic settings.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study has several limitations. For one, the sample is one based on convenience and homogenous: Most of the sample was White and female. Further, the study was limited to heterosexual couples married for longer than one-year. This implicates problems with generalizability and our findings

may not speak to diverse populations or those not engaged in a heteronormative relationship. Thus, this study should be replicated in more diverse populations and include LGBTQ+ individuals of all ethnicities and identities. Another limitation includes the low number of males to females within our sample pool. These limits the conclusions we can draw based and further efforts should be made to increase male response rate in future studies. Lastly, this study relies on cross-sectional data which precludes causal inferences and directionality. For example, we cannot be sure that marriage satisfaction does not predict increases in gratitude as opposed to vice-versa. Future research should use a longitudinal design to parse apart these diverse relationships.

Conclusion

The connection between dispositional gratitude and marriage is an important relationship to understand in the context of soaring divorce rates and related consequences. We found that dispositional gratitude predicts marriage satisfaction, with no difference between sexes: Females and males may experience gratitude similarly. This work has direct clinical applications for those working with people who are dissatisfied or concerned about their relationships. Not only can gratitude be taught in a therapeutic setting, it has far-reaching impacts on life satisfaction and subjective happiness, future helping behaviors, adult attachment styles, and reciprocal engagement, all factors that likely promote satisfied marriages [6,12,22-25]. Future research should continue to explore how to best deliver gratitude-based interventions for those wanting to improve satisfaction in their relationships.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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