

Sleep Patterns and Marital Satisfaction

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Abstract

With fewer people getting married and more people getting divorced in Western industrial societies, the study of marriage continues to be a topic of great interest (US Census Bureau, 2012). This current study examined the relationship between marital satisfaction and sleep patterns with a sample of ten married couples. Email interviews were used for data collection (Meho, 2006). The qualitative approach used in this study was phenomenology, which according to Patton is the study of lived experience (2002). The lived experience comes from multiple contexts including emotions, culture, relationships, jobs, and programs. The interview brings us closer to understanding the subject's experience. A content analysis (Kvale, 1996) of the email interview responses was conducted and themes were determined. Member checking was performed to verify validity of the general ideas and themes. Results from our study revealed that spending time together before bed or in the morning increases marital satisfaction as it allows time for communication and intimacy. Implications for practitioners working with married couples are to encourage engaged and married couples to have discussion and agreement on bedtime or wake routines that leave room for interaction with one another. Implications for future research include a larger sample size, wider variety of participants, and the impact that night shift work and stress have on marital satisfaction.

Keywords: marital satisfaction, sleep patterns, married couples, night-shifts

As fewer people get married and more people get divorced in Western industrial societies, the study of marriage has increasingly become a topic of interest (US Census Bureau 2012; Adams, 2004, as cited in Fincham & Beach, 2010). In fact, Cherlin (2004) states that now more than ever, marriage in the United States is becoming "deinstitutionalized." For these reasons, we

decided to look into different factors that could play a part in the satisfaction of a marriage. One factor that has been under-researched in this area is sleep patterns, which for the purpose of our study we are defining as consistently repeated actions automatically dealing with, or surrounding an individual's daily sleep schedules ("Sleep," 2012; "Routine," 2012; "Pattern," 2012). The literature we reviewed addressed the importance sleep has on biological functioning and that pair sleeping is beneficial to the quality of sleep an individual receives (Krueger & Friedman, 2009). Literature also illustrated how people benefit from being close to one another, and married couples are generally viewed as being close (Diamond, Hicks, & Otter-Henderson, 2008). One study even suggested a link between marital happiness and time spent with one another in shared activities, such as sleep. The same study also considered that the mediating link between sleep and relationship satisfaction may be personal mood (Anderson, Van Ryzin, & Doherty, 2010).

Though this information provides support that sleep and closeness are important, research has identified a clear gap in literature regarding the connection between sleep and marital satisfaction (Rauer, Kelly, Buckhalt, & El-Sheikh, 2010; Meadows, Arber, Venn, Hislop, & Stanley, 2009; Dahl & Et-Sheikh, 2007). Baumeister and Vohs (2007) define marital satisfaction as:

A mental state that reflects the perceived benefits and costs of marriage to a particular person. The more costs a marriage partner inflicts on a person, the less satisfied one generally is with the marriage and with the marriage partner. Similarly, the greater the perceived benefits are, the more satisfied one is with the marriage and with the marriage partner (p. 541).

The purpose of this study was threefold: 1.) to examine the relationship between sleep patterns and marital satisfaction with a sample of Midwestern married couples; 2.) to develop a qualitative interview protocol to assess married couples' perceptions of marital satisfaction; and 3.) that the results from this study would add to the scant literature on the relationship between sleep patterns and marital satisfaction.

Literature Review

A review of the literature through the EBSCOhost database was conducted to examine the relationship between female and male marital satisfaction and sleep patterns. The overall findings of the research showed an increase in marital satisfaction when couples are getting quality sleep together, though all the articles reviewed acknowledged the lack of research relating to sleep and marital satisfaction.

Though research has examined the evolved cultural norms of sleeping patterns, such as sharing a bed with a partner, there is a lack of literature on the association of sleep, relationships, and pair sleeping (Meadows et al. 2009). Diamond et al. (2008) investigated temporary partner separation to see if there were correlations between spousal time spent apart and changes in affect, behavior and physiology. They collected daily diary entries from 42 married or cohabitating heterosexual couples over a period of time surrounding and including a 4-7 day separation. When they were separated, both the homebound and traveling partners experienced an increased amount of sleeping problems. Their sleeping problems reduced significantly upon reuniting with their partner. Krueger & Friedman (2009) also concluded that pair sleeping improves the quality of sleep.

A culture's influence on the shaping of sleep patterns is widely acknowledged throughout the world, yet the relationship between sleep and its effect on human health and development still remains somewhat unrecognized throughout society (Dittami, Keckeis, Machatschke, Katina, Zeitlhofer, Kloesch, 2007). Marital satisfaction has many effects over multiple aspects of an individuals' life (Keicolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001), such as their health (Troxel, Cyranowski, Hall, Frank, & Buysse, 2007; Irwin, Wang, Campomayor, Collado-Hidalge, & Cole, 2006; Hajak, & Group, 2001; Dew, Hoch, Buysse, Begley, & Houck, 2003). In reference to marital satisfaction and physical health, research has shown that low marital quality can increase an individual's chance of cardiovascular disease as well as mortality (Troxel, Buysse, Hall, & Matthews, 2009). Understanding the nature of sleep is applicable to clinical practice as sleep medicine and treatment of sleep disorders have had positive implications for relationships (Troxel et al., 2007).

Couples with high marital satisfaction show fewer sleep problems such as fewer sleep disturbances, fewer problems

falling asleep, fewer nighttime awakenings, and less restless sleep (Pringerson, Maciejewski, & Rosenheck, 1999). A common sleep disturbance among married couples is children. As Medina, Lederhos, and Lillis (2009) found in their research, there is a postpartum decline in marital satisfaction, especially during the first year of their child's life. Their research argues that as people transition into parenthood they face new demands, emotions, and stressors. Interestingly, the cognitive skills needed to cope with this transition are those also most affected by sleep disturbance. Troxel et al. (2009) conducted an in-depth study of the link between marital happiness and sleep disturbances in middle-aged women of multi-ethnic backgrounds and found that an individual's sleep disturbances corresponded with self-reported marital satisfaction rates. Therefore, the fewer disturbances a spouse had at night, the more satisfied they claimed to be in their marriage.

Due to finding scant research investigating sleep and marital satisfaction, we decided to include an international study from southeast England. The research conduct, elements, and results of this study abide by international ethical standards, therefore we feel this survey is relevant and provides adequate information to aid our research (Portaluppi, Touitou, & Smolensky, 2008). The study compared variables such as ideal bed time and ideal wake time to the participant's actual bed and wake times. The study also took into consideration the amount of times a participant woke during the night, the effect of light and dark on sleep, and idealized sleep efficiency. The research study concluded that sharing a bed with a partner can be the cause of daytime drowsiness and sleep deficiency throughout the night.

In general, a demand has grown in research to look at the differences in males and females in pair sleep as females often report experiencing more sleep issues than males (Krishnan & Collop, 2006). It has been hypothesized that because females are more sensitive to emotions, marital problems and negative interactions within a marriage project differently in a female's life. Women actually experience lower-quality free time and less free time in general than men due to many women juggling multiple roles. Because of this, it has been hypothesized that women are more impacted by scheduling, having the least amount of 'refreshing free time' (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). If women are not experiencing relaxing free time during

the day or before bed, they may not be as satisfied with their marriage or sleep as well with their partner (Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003). In the case of the partner separation study (Diamond et al., 2008), the only gender-related difference found was that the female homebound partner reported an increase in negative affect while their partner was gone, whereas the males did not. When it came time for the couples to reunite, both the male and female negative affect declined upon the reunion. Another study showed significant differences between males and females in reaction to pair sleep. Though pair sleep was found to have negative implications for females, including sleep disruption throughout the night, the trend of negative implications of pair sleep was not found in the male subjects (Dittami et al. 2007).

Although the current research addresses the importance of quality sleep in relation to marital satisfaction, it lacks information regarding sleep schedules between married couples. The current study examined the relationship between female and male marital satisfaction and their subsequent sleep patterns, including variables regarding interactions between couples, both at bed time and wake time.

Theoretical Framework

The theory used to inform this study was the Family Ecology Theory. This theory assumes outside influences in multiple environments of life have a significant impact over the individual, couple, or family's emotions, interactions, behaviors, and life roles (Ingoldsby, Miller, & Smith, 2004). There are four separate environments that comprise this theory: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem. As applied to our study, this theory would predict that marital satisfaction is indirectly linked to sleep patterns among married couples. In fact, it could be argued that every environment of the Family Ecology Theory impacts the satisfaction of a marriage. In the microsystem, work shifts into the night or taking care of an infant can affect when a partner goes to bed. In the mesosystem, anxiety from work may indirectly influence one partner to be up later than the other, which could lead to less communication. In the exosystem, a company may change its policy to include company-paid paternity leave, which could positively affect marital satisfaction. The husband, utilizing paternity leave, would be more available to get up during the night and help

his partner with their baby, since he does not need a full night's sleep to prepare for work the next day. In the macrosystem, the shifting American trend toward dual income families may influence a couple's decision to have the wife return to work. With both the husband and wife working, their schedules may hinder time spent together before or after sleep, inadvertently leading to a decrease in their marital satisfaction.

Method

Participants and Sampling

The participants in our study included ten married heterosexual couples, who had been married an average of 21 years. Purposive as well as snowball sampling methods were used in our qualitative email interview. Purposive sampling was applied as it allowed us to easily identify married couples through our previous personal interactions. Snowball sampling allowed us to gain the trust of our participants, empowering them to feel comfortable to share more intimate, lived experiences while responding to our survey.

Research Design

The purpose of this qualitative research was to investigate the lived experiences of married couples, and the effects that each individuals' sleep patterns have on the satisfaction in their marriage. The qualitative approach used in this study was phenomenology. According to Patton, phenomenology is the study of a lived experience (2002), which comes from multiple contexts including emotions, culture, relationships, jobs and programs. Phenomenology brings the researcher closer to understanding the subject's experience.

In recent years, as more researchers conduct qualitative studies, there has been a greater need for low-cost, efficient, timely ways to reach participants. Email interviews have been a growing method of data collection as they address these components (Meho, 2006). Our reasoning for using this method is that email interviews allowed for a high level of anonymity.

This study was approved by the University of Wisconsin-Stout's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Human subjects were protected through the completion of the IRB's Human Subjects training.

Interview Protocol

The semi-structured, in-depth, interview protocol (Kvale, 1996) was created to investigate the relationship between sleep patterns and marital satisfaction. The qualitative email interview started with an implied consent including a brief description of the study, definition of specific terms, risks and benefits of participating in the study, expected time commitment, confidentiality, information on participants' right to withdraw, the stamp of IRB approval, researchers' and supervisors' contact information, and instructions on how to complete the email interview. The protocol included our initial research question, followed by twelve open-ended questions addressing related variables.

Procedure

Ten married heterosexual couples were selected by the researchers to be offered a chance to be in the study. Prior to the email interviews, the twenty participants were individually emailed an invitation to be part of the study on October 18, 2012. The email included an introduction of the researchers and advisor, the course the study was created for, an explanation of how the study would be carried out, the study's requirements, the purpose of the study, what the researchers were hoping to accomplish, assurance of confidentiality, approximate dates the email interview would take place, and the researcher's and advisor's contact information. All twenty participants replied via email agreeing to partake in our study. The study protocol was approved by the University of Wisconsin-Stout's Institutional Review Board. The participant's names were kept confidential from each other by utilizing the blind carbon copy feature in the e-mails. The interviews took place through a Qualtrics link embedded in an e-mail. Qualtrics, the secure data collection software we used, organized the responses, which were then viewed only by the approved researchers.

The twenty participants were sent the email interview including IRB approval, the implied consent form, and the interview questions on October 26, 2012. The participants were given two weeks' time to complete the interview through Qualtrics. Nineteen out of twenty participants met the November 10, 2012 deadline.

Data Analysis Plan

A content analysis (Kvale, 1996) of the email interview responses was conducted by the two undergraduate researchers and themes were determined. An acronym was determined for each of the interview questions. The responses were read separately by each researcher to gain a general understanding of the data. Both researchers wrote down overall ideas from every category in the individual participant's responses. The researchers then met to perform "member checking" to verify validity of the general ideas and themes, which were compared until 100% member agreement was reached. The researchers decided on relevant quotes from the interviews to best represent each of the themes found in the interview responses (Patton, 2002).

Findings

In this section, selected themes that emerged from the interview questions are followed by representative descriptive definitions or primary points made from the participants. All names are pseudonyms. We have listed all of the themes below (See Table 1) but given limited space, we are focusing on the following four themes: Individual time before joined interaction with spouse (19 out of 20 participants responded); Sex is best when well rested (19 out of 20 responded); Quality of interactions with spouse (18 out of 20 responded); and, Security in sleeping with spouse (19 out of 20 responded).

Questions	Themes
How important were sleep patterns to you before you were married?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independence allows for a flexible sleep schedule
How do sleep patterns contribute, or not contribute to your marital satisfaction?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Mood • Intimacy/Sex
What did you discuss about your personal sleep patterns with your spouse before you were married?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learned sleep patterns prior to marriage • No discussion before marriage
If you did not discuss your personal sleep patterns before you married, in retrospect what do you wish you would have discussed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amount of sleep needed • Sleep patterns while raising children
What is your wake-up routine now that you are married?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get ready independently • Get children ready for school
What is your bedtime routine now that you are married?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual time before joined interaction with spouse • Go to bed separately • Go to bed together
How does stress affect your sleep patterns with your spouse?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stressed spouse is awake and restless • Discussing stress before bed attributes to poor sleep
How do sleep patterns affect your sex life with your spouse?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sexual relations are difficult when there are differences in sleep and wake times • Sex is best when well rested
If you experience disruptions in your normal sleep pattern, what are they from?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kids • Stress
How do your sleep patterns affect the amount of interaction you have with your partner?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality of interactions with spouse • Quantity of interactions with spouse
What is the difference in quality of sleep when you are sleeping with your partner versus when you are sleeping alone?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleep quality increases with spouse • Falling asleep time increases with spouse • Security in sleeping with spouse

What is Your Bedtime Routine Now that You Are Married? **Individual time before joined interaction with spouse.**

Bedtime routine consists of having personal time before joined interaction with a spouse before sleep.

"I go up to read between 8:00 to 8:30 and my spouse comes to bed between 9 and 10." (Kristen)

How Do Sleep Patterns Affect Your Sex Life with Your Spouse?

Sex is best when well rested. The more well rested couples feel, the more likely they are to engage in sexual activity with

their spouse.

"I prefer sexual relations in the morning when I am well rested. She prefers them at night. 95% of the time it happens at night, thus I am a little more tired in the morning because it cuts into my sleep time." (Brad)

How Do Your Sleep Patterns Affect the Amount of Interaction You Have with Your Partner?

Quality of interactions with spouse. The quality of interaction and communication with a spouse increases as a spouse gets adequate sleep.

"Like sex life, our interaction is affected by how well rested we are. The better rested we are, the better the interaction we have." (Eric)

What is the Difference in Quality of Sleep When You Are Sleeping with Your Partner Versus When You Are Sleeping Alone?

Security in sleeping with spouse. There is a sense of comfort and peace of mind when couples sleep together, as it cuts down on worrying and provides companionship.

"I like having him in bed, as there is a comfort or security with him there..." (Kelly)

Discussion

With fewer people getting married and more people getting divorced, the study of marriage has become a trending topic of interest (US Census Bureau 2012; Adams, 2004, as cited in Fincham & Beach, 2010). Though previous research addressed some factors that play a part in the satisfaction of a marriage, we did not find research that had been conducted on the effect 'sleep patterns' have on marital satisfaction (Rauer et al. 2010; Meadows et al. 2009; Dahl & Et-Sheikh, 2007). The literature supported that sleep is vital for health, and that sleeping with someone else improves the quality of sleep (Krueger & Friedman, 2009). Literature also concluded that couples with high marital satisfaction show fewer sleep problems (Pringerson et al., 1999). Responses from our participants were in agreement with the literature reviewed.

More specifically, our participants agreed that expectations from society influenced decisions on how they sleep, leading

to an imbalance between social norms and their need for sleep (Dittami et al., 2007). The remainder of the paper will include: connecting findings with the literature or theory, limitations to the study, implications for practitioners, implications for future research, and the conclusion.

Individual Time before Joined Interaction with Spouse

The social norm that spouses in a healthy, happy relationship go to sleep together (Rauer et al., 2010; Troxel et al., 2009; Meadows et al., 2009; Diamond et al., 2008; Dittami et al., 2007) is widely accepted, though it does not take into consideration the individualized physical need for sleep. In order to balance the physical need and social norm, one spouse may go to bed earlier but wait to fall asleep until their spouse joins him/her. Our research showed that although males and females made efforts to sacrifice sleep in order to spend time with one another, the females in our study reported more of a difference in ideal sleep times and actual sleep times.

Sex is Best When Well Rested

Our participants noted that the quality of their intimate and sexual interactions increased dramatically when they received more sleep. The Family Ecology Theory supports their statement because often work requirements affect sleep patterns, which then affects sex life. In the exosystem (indirect consequences the individual experiences from their surrounding institutions), work hours mandate when an individual can spend time at home with their spouse. This then affects the microsystem (direct influences that impact the individual), encompassing the interactions going on in the household, such as sex (Ingoldsby et al., 2004).

Quality of Interaction with Spouse

Our research revealed how sleep patterns affect both the amount of time couples interacted with each other as well as the quality of those interactions. When spouses had similar sleep patterns, it provided more time to spend with one another before sleep. This time allowed for communication and sharing-key components in marital satisfaction. Research supported the importance of having people in your life that will provide support, comfort, and a listening ear, which can buffer problems of everyday life (Rauer et al., 2010).

Security in Sleeping with Spouse

A body of previous research supports the act of sleeping related to a feeling of safety, allowing an individual's body to relax and sleep (Rauer et al., 2010; Troxel et al., 2009; Meadows et al., 2009; Diamond et al., 2008; Dittami et al., 2007). When comparing males and females, the females in our study reported more anxiety when sleeping alone whereas their husbands saw it more as an inconvenience. This gender-related difference is supported by literature which notes that in cases of sleeping alone, the females reported an increase in negative affect while their partner was gone, whereas the males did not (Rauer et al., 2010).

Limitations

Limitations of this study include a small sample size- this study had a sample size of 19. Another limitation is that this study lacked ethnic and racial diversity, as all of our participants were Caucasian. In reference to sexual orientation, our study only addressed heterosexual marriages. Though we did not have an option for our participants to select their race in our demographics section, our method of snowball sampling people we knew made us aware of their race. In addition, our study did not address the entire spectrum of varying socioeconomic statuses- all of our participants were from the middle class.

Implications for Practitioners

Our research suggests that practitioners working with engaged couples should encourage them to discuss their personal sleep patterns as it can positively influence future marital satisfaction. Flexibility and compromise are necessary for couples to create a sleep schedule that allows them to spend time in bed with one another at night and/or in the morning.

Even if couples are consistently going to bed at different times, practitioners can encourage them to spend 15 minutes with one another before the first spouse falls asleep. For couples that have one spouse working night shifts, it may be helpful for them to make a phone call home to their spouse before the spouse at home falls asleep.

If one or both partners is going to bed stressed, practitioners can help them find a healthy release before they go to bed (journaling, taking a bath, reading, etc.). This may help them

avoid arguments with their spouse, decrease the amount of time it takes to fall asleep and lead to a more restful sleep.

Implications for Future Research

For future research, it is recommended that a study is done with a larger number of participants and with more diversity. More research needs to be done on the impact of night-shift work on a marriage. It would also be interesting to study the amount of equal compromise in a marriage to see if it would be a predictor for a higher level of marital satisfaction, a better sex life, and more effective communication. Stress was another theme in our study that inadvertently affected marital satisfaction; therefore, we see benefit in doing research on effective ways for couples to release their stress-before going to bed.

Conclusion

The findings of this study can be useful to counseling professionals and researchers working with married couples as it illustrates the lived experiences of a sample of married couples pertaining to sleep patterns and its effect on marital satisfaction. Our findings suggest that a key to positive marital satisfaction is to make communication between spouses a priority, and to continue communicating about preference of sleep patterns as each phase in life evolves.

"When we have time in bed either waking or sleeping the connection of talking with one another and physically cuddling contributes to our marital satisfaction greatly" (Alexa).

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