



Theoretical Analysis of Savoring Strategies and Quality of Relationship among Married Couples

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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of the present study was to study savoring in married couples in relation with Happiness and Quality of Relationship that was assessed using Relationship Satisfaction, Relationship Motivation and Relationship Depression. Savoring was assessed using two dimensions—Savoring beliefs and Savoring strategies. Savoring Beliefs included Savoring through Anticipation, Savoring the Moment, Savoring through Reminiscence and Total Savoring Ability. Savoring Strategies comprised of Sharing with others, Memory building, Self congratulation, Comparing, Sensory-perceptual sharpening, Absorption, Behavioral expression, Temporal awareness, Counting blessings and Kill-joy thinking. Another aim of the study was to identify gender differences in Savoring strategies and Savoring Beliefs.

Key words: Married couples, Savoring strategies

INTRODUCTION

Relations between human beings bring elation to their sense of existence. Dr. Daniel Gilbert, the leading scientist who studies happiness said, "We are happy when we have family, we are happy when we have friends and almost all the other things we think make us happy are actually just ways of getting more family and friends." The significance of social relationships in the successful functioning of human lives was also highlighted well by Berscheid (2003) who said, "Relationships constitute the single most important factor responsible for the survival of homo sapiens." Social ties may enhance personal control (through social support) and in turn personal control is advantageous for mental and physical health. On the other hand, research shows that poor quality and low quantity of social ties are associated with impaired immune function, adverse health outcomes and mortality (Zhang & Hayward, 2006; Hughes & Waite, 2009).

Social relationships not only help people flourish but also prove to be of great help in post traumatic growth as well. For instance, Bhushan and Kumar (2012) highlighted the role of relating to others, proactive coping and appreciation of life facilitating growth among tsunami relief volunteers. Support from close relations also works wonders in times of a physical or mental illness. Raje (2019) stressed the significance of strengthening the family of a mental illness patient and clubbing positive psychotherapy with pharmacotherapy, the outcome of which showed in the recovery rate being 85% and overall attainment of family mental health.

Research suggests that people engage in social activities like doing something with one's family, meeting new friends; personal recreation like working on something that brings with it a sense of achievement; and spiritual activities like praying and meditating, with the purpose of increasing positive emotions and the frequency of such behaviors is highly correlated with happiness (Warner & Vroman, 2011; Henricksen & Stephens, 2013).

It has been found that the desire and sensation of being loved and wanted is very essential in life (Miller & Perlman, 2008). This desire instigates people to enter into close intimate relationships. These intimate relationships are of crucial importance to the society and to humanity because without interacting and socializing, the human species would not procreate (Miller & Perlman, 2008). The word intimate has originated from the Latin term "intimus" which means "inner" or "inmost." Bennet (2000) describes it in terms of inner experiences and emotions of a person, which are private or confidential. According to Smyer (2013), intimacy refers to the feeling of



belonging with another individual, being in close and personal relation to that individual. Thus relationships form the very essence of our existence.

MARRIAGE

Of all the social relationships, the strongest and the most intimate relationship is that of married individuals. Marriage is an important institution of the society which marks the union of two individuals, emotionally, physically and mentally. It legally allows sexual relations encouraging both the husband and wife to be loyal in the relationship (Rao, 2002; Stutzer & Frey, 2006) and for producing and raising children (Ponzetti & Mutch, 2006). Panganiban (2007) defines marriage as, "a social contract between two individuals that unites their lives legally, economically and emotionally" that gives legitimacy to sexual relations within the marriage. Rusbult and Van Lunge (2003) assert that making sacrifices is important in building an intimate relationship, generating feelings of acceptance, trust and care. Permanence and stability are the most important factors of marriage not just for the couple but also for their family and society as a whole (Sonpar, 2005) as mostly people get into this relationship with the thought of getting married once for lifetime.

Marriage has a profound impact on the lives of men and women all over the world. Infact, one's health, happiness and sense of wellbeing is largely affected by what "happens" in couple relationships (Knox & Schacht, 2010). In addition to being the deepest relation, it is also the most complex of all relationships because two individuals of different independent thinking have to spend their life together for the common interest of the relationship. It is considered to be more of a social affair than an individual affair, as it is a bonding of two families and not just two individuals (Sonpar, 2005).

Bird and Melville (1994) rightly said, "Marriage is not only a personal commitment between partners, it is a social and legal commitment to the larger community." The closed contact between the couples provides them with emotional, informational and economic support, and the extended family helps them resolve conflicts as marital problems should normatively not be disclosed to outsiders (Natarajan & Thomas, 2002). It can be said that marriage glues the family together. Apart from being beneficial to the couple, a strong and stable marriage ensures that the future generations also become responsible members of the society.

Love marriages have nowadays gained popularity over the previously prevalent arranged marriages. This change can even be seen in the way marriage is defined. Whitehead and Popenoe (2001) describe marriage as the 'super Relationship', a unification fulfilling sexual, spiritual, emotional and romantic needs rather than religious, social or economic requirements

Marriage is considered to be the most intimate of all relationships where individuals feel close and connected to a level where they drop all psychological barriers ultimately sharing their innermost thoughts (Rathus, Nevid, & Fichner-Rathus, 2011). It should however be noted that social relationships like the most salient one – marriage- can be a source of both support and stress for many individuals (Walen & Lachman, 2000) and poor marital quality links with reduced immune endocrine function and depression (Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). So we should try to accentuate the support provided by marriage as opposed to the stressful sources associated with it. Every couple entering married life has a goal of having a successful marital relationship. Hence, gaining knowledge about several vital factors contributing to the achievement of such a goal is valuable.

CHANGING SCENARIO OF MARRIAGE

Earlier husbands and wives had gender-biased roles of providing financial support and doing household chores respectively and the basic purpose of marriage was only procreation and



continuity of family. Numerous researchers have highlighted the advantages for married couples over the non-married ones which include having fewer acute illnesses, lesser cases of depression, suicide rate, better mental health, better sex lives, a better chance of living longer and a happier life (Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Ribar, 2003).

Despite all these advantages lesser people are opting for marriages due to various alternative reasons. Nock (2005) has given five reasons responsible for this changing scenario in the sacred institution of marriage. With increasing emphasis on attaining education and financial security more and more people are focusing on completing higher education and opting for jobs before getting into marital companionship. Due to this, there has been seen an upward trend in having marriages at older ages. Living together without being married is a common practice these days employed by couples after dating (Amato et al., 2003). King and Scott (2005) found financial and sexual convenience as the major reasons for cohabitation. However, Hohmann-Marriott (2006) concluded that cohabitation leads to higher divorce rates and short-lived marriages because of lack of problem solving and communication skills, and poor knowledge about self and partner. Also, a legal and social obligation of marriage is lacking in couple who cohabit so they do not see any reason to put efforts into their relationship in cases of minor issues as well and prefer opting out of the relationship as the easiest solution.

The last reason attributed by Nock (2005) is decline in the fertility rate. Development and availability of birth control pills and protective measures like condoms have led to a rise in premarital sex and sex without the risk of pregnancy. A peculiar aspect sanctioned by institution of marriage now has no risk associated with it, hence, leading to delayed or even rejection of marriage.

Another reason why people do not prefer marriages these days is the difficulty of attaining work-life balance. Careers these days are given utmost importance and it is after a lot of hard work, dedication and luck that people land up in good satisfying jobs. Therefore, they don't want to compromise or sacrifice their work life for the family life which is inevitable after marriage.

INDIAN VIEW OF MARRIAGE

Marriage is a universal social institution which has different implications in different cultures. It is deemed quintessential for possibly everyone in India, where it is the greatest event in a family. People spend huge amounts of money for this occasion, with some taking loans to fulfill the expectations/norms of a grand affair. This makes marriage the most awaited celebration in not only the person's life, but everybody associated with the bride and the groom as well. Sharma (2004) defines it as a religious sacrament wherein a man and a woman are bound in a permanent relationship for physical, social and spiritual purpose of dharma, procreation and sexual pleasure.

In the Indian culture, marriage is celebrated as a sacrament, a rite enabling two individuals to start their journey in life together. Ratra, Kaur and Chhikara (2006) say that happiness, harmony and growth are the three essential values of the Hindu wedding. The Indian society has gradually changed with the changing times in terms of marriage. Though arranged marriages seem to be the most preferred means of getting into this institution yet, love marriages and love-cum-arranged marriages are also gaining popularity and approval these days.

SAVORING

The evolutionary perspective gives evidence of our unintentional focus on threats due to survival instinct. According to research, people have positive experiences thrice more than the negative ones (Gable & Haidt, 2005), yet more attention is given to the negative ones (Baumeister et al., 2001). The predisposition to watching out for threats empowers us to cope with the negative situations. However, this selective attention to the negative experiences diminishes our ability to



notice and appreciate the positive experiences in our life (Bryant & Veroff, 2007), and the benefits associated with their acknowledgment.

Savoring is not simply experiencing pleasure or enjoyment. It is distinct from pleasure and happiness which are potential outcomes of savoring. On the contrary, it involves taking the perspective of an intriguing journalist towards one's pleasurable experiences and then reporting these inquiries to oneself. Moreover, pleasure alone does not guarantee savoring. It is actually meta-awareness or mindful attention of the pleasurable experience which is either amplified or dampened and elongated or curtailed, that leads to savoring. The term savoring is associated with the active processes capturing the interaction between the person and environment during positive experiences rather than the outcome of enjoyment. Various research evidences suggest that examples of savoring can be seen whenever individuals are attentive to how much wellbeing they are deriving from a positive event (be it any accomplishment or social connection), interaction with nature or the joy of looking at the young ones grow up, besides the countless other positive feelings (Bryant & Veroff, 2007).

Savoring is an important form of self-care because it helps you to feel nourished throughout your day, even when you can't take time off. When you truly savor something you eat, smell, feel, see, or hear, your brain registers the positive feelings that come with that experience, helping you to feel more uplifted. Your brain gets used to anything familiar, which is why you may not notice the many small, good moments throughout your day, but savoring helps to overcome this tendency. Research shows that the frequency of small, positive experiences rather than huge peak events has a greater impact on your overall life satisfaction (Kogan, 2018).

Savoring is an affective regulation tactic that is characterized by the inclination to focus and exert control over how individuals identify, develop, intensify and sustain positive emotions (Bryant & Veroff, 2007). For example, individuals often generate and enhance positive emotions relating to a vacation by making use of savoring tactics like anticipation, fantasizing and proactively constructing an enjoyable itinerary beforehand. Furthermore, they may also absorb and block distractions mindfully immersing themselves in the enjoyment of the current vacation activity.

Savoring can be explained from the broadest level descending to a narrower level. The broadest level being savoring experiences, followed by savoring processes, savoring beliefs and savoring strategies (Bryant, Chadwich & Kluwe, 2011) as shown in figure-1.



Figure-1: Conceptual levels of savoring: broad to narrow (Bosetti, 2014)

SAVORING STRATEGIES

A savoring strategy or a response is a specific behavior or thought in which a person is engaged, in reaction to a positive stimulus, outcome or event. The impact of various positive events on positive emotions is moderated by these cognitive or behavioral strategies, by amplifying or dampening the intensity of positive feelings, or by prolonging or curtailing the duration of



positive feelings. These responses are operational components of savoring processes. For example, a savoring process of basking is accompanied by cognitive responses reflecting self-congratulation, where one thinks about how hard or how long one has worked for that outcome, and how impressed and happy others might be by one's achievements (Bryant & Veroff, 2007).

Adler and Fagley (2005) have distinguished between triggers and strategies for amplifying enjoyment. Triggers spontaneously and unintentionally evoke positive feelings in people, while strategies are intentional responses people employ to inculcate an attitude of appreciation. For example, another person's misfortune may instantly trigger a feeling of thankfulness for one's own life being free from such adversity, whereas taking the time to count one's blessings and saying a prayer of thanks before a meal may be a deliberate intentional strategy for appreciation (Adler & Fagley, 2005).

To find out the various strategies people use to help them savor their positive experiences, Bryant created a paper and pencil, self-report questionnaire, where respondents were asked questions like: What was the last good thing that happened to you? Are you aware of anything you thought or did when you were experiencing this positive event that might have influenced your enjoyment of it? If so, what were those thoughts or behaviors and how did they influence your enjoyment? The most commonly mentioned recent positive event by college students was "going on a vacation" and the next recent positive event was "a date with someone special." The response from both the events showed that there were some similarities in perceived effects of savoring strategies across different events. Also, for both the positive events, some of the strategies seemed to be ineffective. In addition to that, it has been found that some approaches to savoring a particular positive event are not necessarily effective for all the individuals (Bryant & Veroff, 2007).

To construct a closed ended questionnaire Fred Bryant (2007) compiled the most frequently mentioned responses that individuals gave about what they think or do when something good happens to them. He also went through previous theories and findings on thoughts and emotions and how people try to control them (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Through refined pilot testing, he culminated a set of 60 thoughts and behaviors that describe the way people may respond while going through a positive event. The final instrument – Ways of Savoring Checklist (WOSC) assesses 10 different savoring strategies, out of which nine are amplifying cognitive and behavioral strategies of savoring and one is a dampening, cognitive savoring strategy. These strategies are discussed below:

1. Sharing with Others

As the name suggests, this strategy involves sharing any positive event with others, describing the event and the feelings associated with that event to others. This dimension is a positive counterpart of social support, which is a coping strategy for handling stress. It has been found that adolescents seek social support to help them savor positive experiences more than to cope with negative experiences. Furthermore, the role of social support in increasing positive wellbeing has been found to be more than reducing subjective distress (Meehan, Durlak & Bryant, 1993). Extraverts are more likely to share positive experiences with others than introverts. Moreover, sharing a positive experience with clinically depressed individuals or anhedonic people may result in lowering the enjoyment of that experience in comparison to sharing it with others who are outwardly expressive in sharing the joy. It should also be noted that merely thinking about sharing a positive experience with a significant other may bring equal level of enjoyment as actual sharing of the event with a person physically present will bring.



2. Memory building

This strategy is moderately related to the savoring strategy of sharing with others. It is in fact motivated by the urge of sharing a positive experience with others later. Memory building involves taking mental photographs of the event or highlighting and noticing the positive elements for future recall. In this way, people are motivated to form clearer and more vivid memories of the moment for later recall.

3. Self-congratulation

It is a cognitive form of savoring which can spill over to behavioral expressions of celebration, occurring mostly in response to some personal achievement or success. The term congratulate originates from the Latin term "congratulatari" which means "to wish joy." This strategy includes wishing joy to oneself or basking in the glory of pride or satisfaction over some positive experience due to one's effort. Other forms of public self-congratulation like bragging or boasting, reflecting excessive selfpromotion can in fact have devastating effects for the individual due to which others might start distancing themselves from that individual.

4. Comparing

The use of this strategy either for the benefit of oneself or for one's own disadvantage is in the control of the user. A cognitive comparison creating a downward contrast can enhance enjoyment of the experience whereas the opposite of it or a feeling of relative deprivation can dampen enjoyment of the experience. Therefore, it is a sensitive savoring strategy depending on the specific target or type of comparison that one makes determining affective reactions.

Therefore, if one wishes to enhance savoring, one must be selective in employing downward rather than upward social (e.g. "I'm better off than others"), temporal (e.g. "I'm better off now than before") or counterfactual (e.g., " Things might not have been this good") comparison in response to positive events. Comparing generally involves thinking what one does not have rather than thinking about what one has. Thus, too much comparison may hinder the flow of savoring the positive experience.

5. Sensory-perceptual sharpening

Closing one's eyes and just focusing on the song being played is an example of sensory-perceptual sharpening whereby individuals try to block out other stimuli from one's attention and focus on just the target stimulus to enjoy it fully. Other sensory stimuli may interrupt the pleasure associated with one particular target stimulus and hence dampen savoring associated with it. Thus, sensory –perceptual sharpening is like the cognitive concept of selective abstraction (Larsen, Diener & Cropanzano, 1987), in which individuals think about certain aspects of the situation overlooking others.

6. Absorption

Absorption resembles Csikszentmihalyi's (2002) notion of flow experiences, in which the individual tries not to think much and gets totally engrossed in the moment. This immersion in the moment involves simply experiencing the ongoing positive event fully with a conscious avoidance of cognitive or intellectual reflection of the event. This strategy parallels the Buddhist perspective to some extent, which focuses on being in the moment, mindfully going through and feeling the moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1990), rather than going into the judgement of what one is experiencing. Different people choose different ways of experiencing pleasurable events, whereby some try just to feel their feelings and others try to cognitively describe the event as elaborately as possible. Going by the theory and research on individual differences in the need for cognition (Cacioppo et al., 1996) it can be said that those people who have a high need for



cognition prefer to elaborate the positive event. On the other hand, people low in need for cognition might prefer savoring through absorption.

7. Behavioral expression

This strategy is in contrast to the cognitive savoring strategies. In this strategy, there is physical manifestation of inner feelings, where one expresses one's elation through jumping and dancing, laughing or smiling, making verbal sounds of appreciation or hugging and kissing. All these responses may be reflexive or deliberate. Reflecting on self-perception theory and facial feedback hypothesis, it can be concluded that feelings can be intensified when they are outwardly expressed. Thus, by putting on a happy face, people may make themselves feel more positive.

8. Temporal awareness

This cognitive strategy of savoring involves a heightened sense of awareness of the fleetingness of the moment, thereby enjoying it to the fullest when it is occurring. People consciously realize that this positive event will soon be over. Thinking about a future time when this moment will end, makes them extract most of the joy from that moment. Bittersweet experiences specially favor savoring. It is the realization of the short span of these experiences which makes them even more special and worthy magnifying attention and appreciation. For making use of this strategy of savoring, people do not have to necessarily wait for the occurrence of an ephemeral bittersweet experience, but they can consciously and deliberately remind themselves of the transitory nature of positive experiences and savor them in the here and now.

9. Counting blessings

This strategy requires the individual to take note of all the things one is grateful for, things that make one feel lucky and things reminding oneself of one's good fortune. Emmons and Shelton (2002) believe that counting blessings include the identification of things one is grateful for, the source of this particular blessing and then link one's thankfulness to this source. Counting blessings and giving or outwardly expressing thanks are related but two different things. Simply identifying one's blessings in life does not mean that one outwardly expresses one's gratefulness for that blessing. Some people express gratitude through letters, messages, prayers, verbal appreciation, poetry, etc. Still others never express it. According to Emmons and McCullough (2003), counting blessings can well promote subjective wellbeing; however, it is difficult to feel a sense of gratitude if one sees nothing for which, or no one to whom one is grateful. Emmons & McCullough (2003) highlight the use of counting blessings in increasing psychological wellbeing and it is this strategy which has been widely used as a key strategy to increase happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2008).

10. Kill-joy thinking

Unlike the other strategies of savoring this is the only strategy that dampens or decreases savoring. This strategy brings focus on the fact that a happy or enjoyable moment will end soon, or that one should have been doing something else at the moment or also the fact that the current positive event could have been better in some ways. All these thoughts interfere with the ongoing happy moment or experience; hence, resulting in diminishing the process of savoring rather than facilitating it. Cultural differences show that the usage of this strategy is considered sad in the western cultures whereas in Eastern cultures it is socially accepted and promoted as people may intentionally dampen enjoyment using kill-joy thinking to conform to the stereotype of negative consequences of positive outcomes (Lindberg, 2004). It may reflect Asian social norms to maintain equilibrium between the positive and negative. According to Beck (1976), the use of this strategy perpetuates depression. There has been evidence regarding the relationship between



the usage of kill-joy thinking and self-esteem. People with lower self-esteem seem to employ this strategy more in response to positive outcomes than people with higher self-esteem who make use of amplifying savoring strategies.

CONCLUSION

The present investigation can be instrumental in taking a step forward to gaining a deeper insight into the underpinnings of successful marital counseling practices whereby savoring skills can be interwoven in marital and family counseling and therapy. Individuals seeking help can learn to strategically choose savoring strategies according to the nature of positive events and re-work on their marital issues.

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