Marital Relationship Satisfaction: Impacts of Children, Religion, Income Level, and Gender

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Abstract
To understand the effect of having children and length of marriage on relationship satisfaction, 4000 participants were analyzed from data supplied from the Relate Institute, which is dedicated to assessing marital satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction followed the same pattern over time both controlling for, and not controlling for, the number of children. Children were found to have a significant effect ($p < 0.05$) on all religious populations studied: The happiest marriages had no children, while the next happiest marriages had five or more children, and this was true for both males and females, but not true across different income levels. It was also found that Latter Day Saint (Mormon) and Protestant relationships had significantly higher relationship satisfaction than Catholics and those who reported no religion.

Keywords: Religion, income, relationship satisfaction, gender

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Introduction

Children drastically alter the dynamics of a marriage, especially in regards to the relationship satisfaction of the couple. Previous research has shown that there is a negative correlation between marital satisfaction and the presence of children. This can be partially attributed to the fact that unhappily married people, though desiring separation, are more likely to remain married because of the presence of children (White, Booth, & Edwards, 1986). Interestingly, this effect is mitigated when income is controlled for (Tsang, Harvey, Duncan, & Sommer, 2003). As found by Wilcox and Marquardart (2011), religiosity has a positive correlation with marital satisfaction, and it has also been shown that couples with four or more children are happier. In relation to the positive correlation between religiosity and marital satisfaction, this effect might be attributed to the fact that religious individuals are more likely to have more children, and thus also receive more support from the communities to which they belong. (Wilcox & Marquardt, 2011). Vanlaningham, Johnson, & Amato (2001) found that marital happiness tends to decrease at a lower rate once college age children leave the parental house, and to also decrease after the first years of marriage due to relationship disenchantment. The presence of children accounts for some of the decrease in marital happiness of the first 25 years of marriage but not for the decline of it over the course of a lifetime (Vanlaningham, Johnson, & Amato, 2001).

Because of this research, the first hypothesis was that for both genders, the happiest marriages would have no children, followed by marriages with five or more children. The second hypothesis was that marital satisfaction would not decrease over time after controlling for children. The third hypothesis was that income level would alter the effect that number of children had on marital satisfaction, and for the last hypothesis, it was hypothesized that one's religious denomination would alter the effect that number of children has on marital satisfaction.

Because marital satisfaction is a complex phenomenon with many influencing variables, the goal of this study was to help better understand and explain some of the complexities of marital satisfaction by measuring or controlling for the covariates that have been mentioned in previous research. The current study provided an empirical investigation into the possible impact on a relationship of three particular covariances: marriage duration, income level, and religion, measuring them between participants with various numbers of children and couples' relationship satisfaction.

Method

Participants

In the original data set (Holman, Busby, Doxey, Klein, & Loyer-Carlson, 1997), 5,097 participants took part in this study. However, all non-married couples were excluded, and as a result only 1,534 participants were analyzed. 578 were males and 956 were females. The age range was 18-79 (M = 34, SD = 11.3).

Materials and Procedure

The data for this study was secondary data gathered from the RELATE Questionnaire, which is an online survey developed by the RELATE Institute at Brigham Young

University - Provo (Holman et al., 1997) The questionnaire provides a way to analyze potential strengths, weaknesses, and problem areas in a relationship, making it easier to identify and talk about these problems areas and improve relationships. A data set from this questionnaire was analyzed and various hypotheses were run utilizing the statistical analysis software Statistica (StatSoft, Inc., 2012) to come up with the results.

Results

This study analyzed the various aspects that can influence relationship satisfaction. The first hypothesis was that for both genders, the happiest marriages would have no children, followed by marriages with five or more children. Two One-Way ANOVAs were run, one for each gender, with number of children as the independent variable, and relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable. While the hypothesis was true for women ($F(3, 950) = 38.21$, $p <.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.11$), the results showed that men with no children ($F(3, 573) = 22.30$, $p <. 001$, $\eta^2 = 0.1$) were not significantly happier than men with five or more children (See Figure 1).

The second hypothesis was that marital satisfaction would not decrease over time after controlling for children. An ANOVA with marriage length as the independent variable and relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable was ran. As can be seen in the graph (See Figure 2), relationship satisfaction decreased for the first 16-20 years, and then increased afterwards ($F(10, 1523) = 29.26$, $p <. 001$, $\eta^2 = 0.16$). The results were similar when an ANCOVA was run and number of children was controlled for ($F(10, 1509) = 7.82$, $p<. 001$, $\eta^2 = 0.05$). The hypothesis was not supported.

The third hypothesis was that income level would alter the effect that number of children had on marital satisfaction. A factorial ANOVA was run with income level and number of children as independent variables, and relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable. The main effect for income was found to be significant ($F(4, 1494) = 2.6429$, $p = .03223$). Income did not impact relationship satisfaction for parents with differing number of children, and the hypothesis was supported. However, there were only two significant differences of real note. Those with less than $20,000 income and no children seemed to have higher relationship satisfaction than everyone else except the $200,000 childless group and those with five children at any income level above $20,000. Those with $20,000-59,000 and no children also had higher relationship satisfaction than many of the other groups (See Figure 3).

Lastly, it was hypothesized that one's religious denomination would alter the effect that number of children has on marital satisfaction. A factorial ANOVA was run with religion and number of children as independent variables and relationship satisfaction as the dependent variable. The religions included for the analyses were Catholics, Protestants, Latter-Day Saints (LDS) and the category for "none." The main effect for religion was found to be significant $F(3, 1367) = 12.817$, $p <. 001$. Religion did seem to impact marital happiness differently for parents with various number of children. LDS without children were significantly higher than the other groups when they had no children. Catholics were significantly lower than Protestants and LDS when they had 1-2 children. LDS were significantly higher than Catholic and none at 3-4 children (See Figure 4).

Discussion

For the first hypothesis, that for both genders the happiest marriages would have no children, followed by marriages with five or more children, results yielded evidence that the presence of children generally had a negative influence on marital satisfaction for female and male participants. Consistent with the first hypothesis, participants without children had the highest relationship satisfaction, while the next happiest relationships had five or more children. Since couples with no children have a consistently higher marital satisfaction than couples with one to four children, this may be explained by White, Booth, and Edward's (1986) theory that unhappy couples are less likely to separate because of their children. This could imply that those with more children are less happy simply due to their being "stuck" in a relationship, not because of the presence of children. The relatively high relationship satisfaction in participants with five or more children could also be attributed to the reasoning laid out in in the study by Wilcox and Marquardart (2011), which says that those with four or more children are happier, likely due to the levels of community support they receive from their religious communities.

The second hypothesis was that marital satisfaction would not decrease over time after controlling for children. The analysis on the difference in marital satisfaction between marriage length generated a similar pattern described by Vanlaningham, Johnson, and Amato's 2001 study. A U-shaped pattern of marital happiness was found with a gradual reduction in the first 20 years of marriage and a steady increase after 20 years of marriage. A virtually identical result was produced when the number of children was controlled for. Therefore, the result did not provide support for the second hypothesis, which expected an alteration in the reduction pattern when controlling for the number of children. One possible explanation of this phenomenon is the the period effect (when the study was done) and other confounding variables mentioned by Vanlaningham, Johnson, and Amato (2001). As the literature suggests, the interaction between marital happiness and marriage duration is influenced by multiple factors, including the period effect. Although the number of children can be accounted for some influence, it alone does not outweigh other factors.

In the third analysis, the study investigated whether income level would impact the influence that number of children had on marital satisfaction. The results produced evidence that is consistent with the results of Tsang, Harvey, Duncan, & Sommer's 2003 study which found that income level significantly impacted the relationship between the number of children and marital satisfaction. The results revealed two profiles that produced a significant difference from that of many of the other groups. A household with lower than $20,000 income and no children tended to have higher marital satisfaction than all other groups except the childless households with higher than $200,000 income, and also households with five or more children in income levels above $20,000. Since both the the number of children and income level could be indicative of a longer marriage duration, this could be a confounding variable since relationships already have higher satisfaction after 16-20 years. This fits into the model of U-shaped pattern between marriage duration and marital satisfaction suggested by Vanlaningham, Johnson, and Amato (2001). The other significant profile was that of couples with less than $20,000 income and no children had higher relationship satisfaction than most other groups, except: income level above $200,000

households with no children and households that made more than $20,000 and had five or more children. Those with 20,000 to 59,000 and no children also had higher relationship satisfaction than many of the other groups.

The last analysis explored the interaction effect between different religious denominations and number of children on marital satisfaction. By revealing significant interaction effects, the results generated support for the hypothesis that an individual's religious denomination would alter the impact that the number of children has on marital satisfaction. Participants who were Latter-Day Saints (LDS) with no children expressed significantly higher marital satisfaction than participants in other religious denominations without children. Since LDS have been shown to have higher religious commitment than other denominations that have been measured (Pew Research Center, 2014), the result is similar to Wilcox and Marquardt's 2011 study that suggested a positive correlation between religiosity and marital satisfaction. Despite the similarity, the results that were found in this study are not completely consistent with those in Wilcox and Marquardt's (2011), as they do not show the same trend in regards to number of children.

In spite of the fact that children had a moderate effect on marital satisfaction as shown in the first analysis, it did not seem to explain the overall trend of marital satisfaction over time. One's gender, income, and religion had an effect on the satisfaction children will bring, These results should be evaluated with care due to the fact that more than five children were not available at every income level and for every religion due to limited sample size of those with five or more children. These results are consistent with some previous literature, which is encouraging and points to the need for more comprehensive work in regards to the topic to determine other confounds and subtleties not measured in this study.

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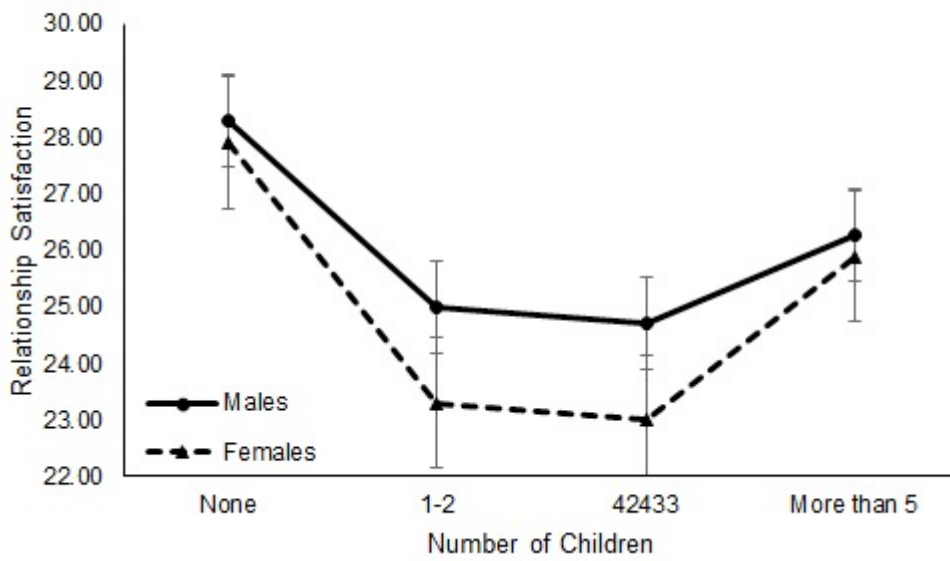
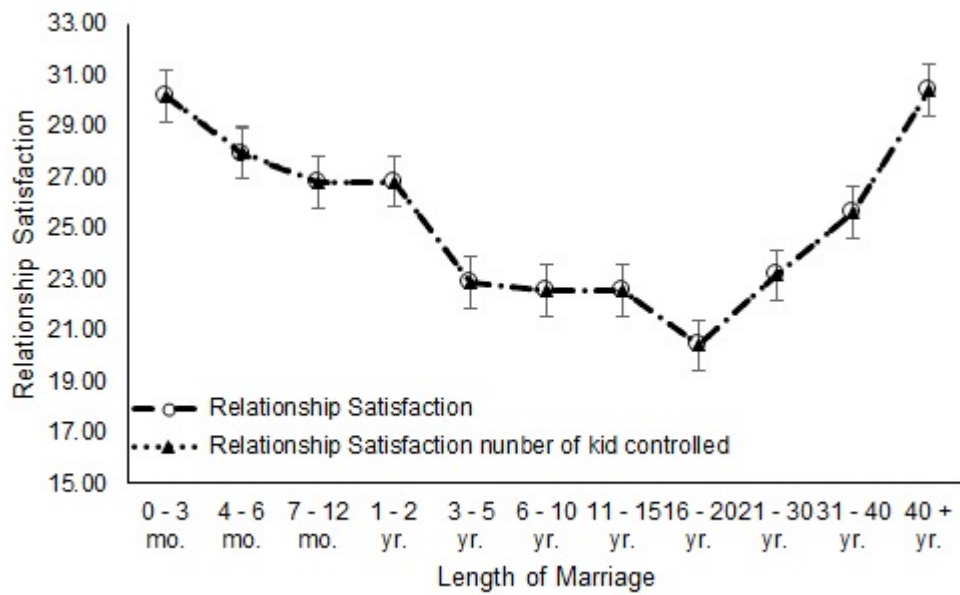*Figure 1*. Number of children's influence on relationship satisfaction.

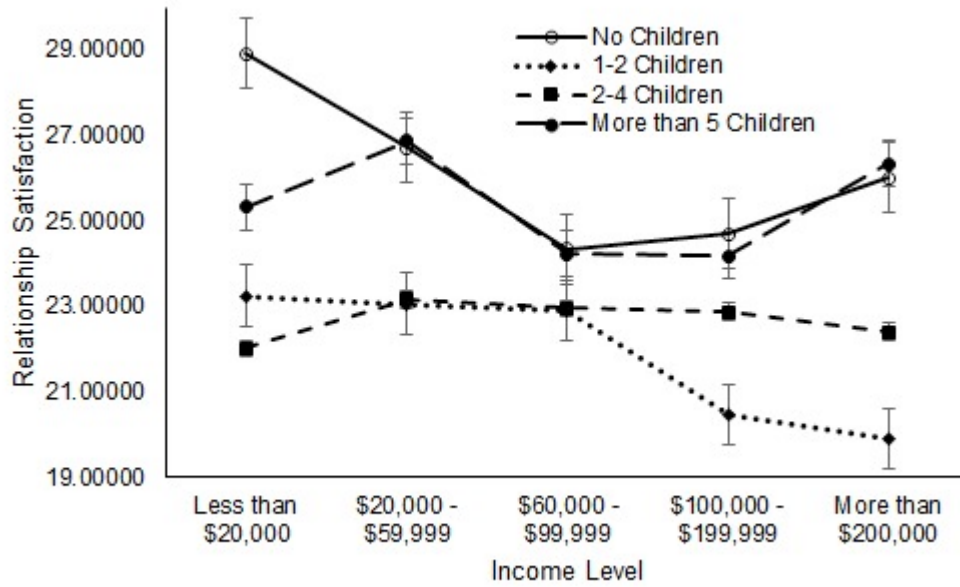*Figure 2*. The influence of marriage length on relationship satisfaction.

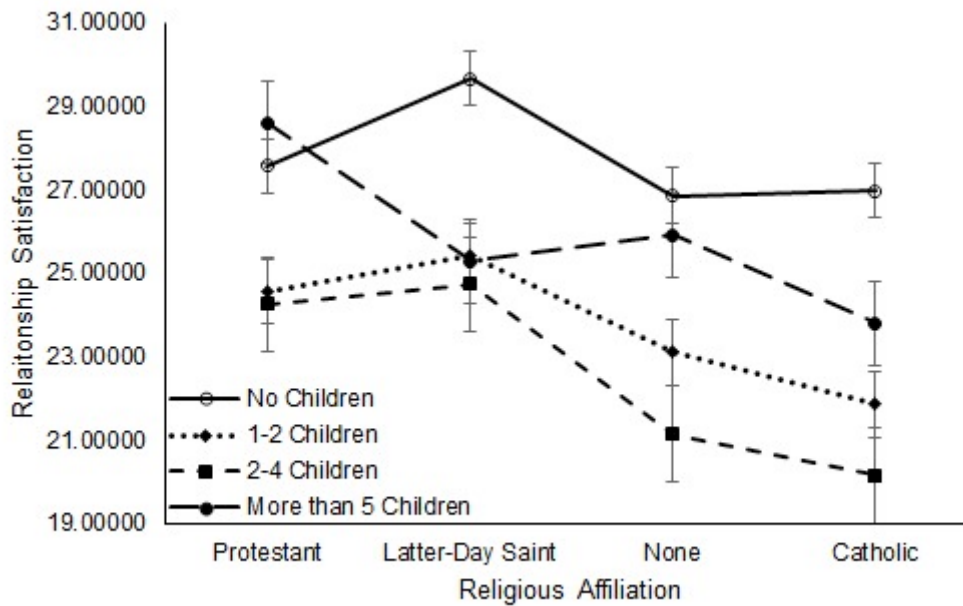*Figure 3.* Number of children and income level on relationship satisfaction.

Figure 4. Number of children and religion on relationship satisfaction.