

The relationship between communication and high levels of marital satisfaction: a systematic review

PJ de Beer
22035583

Dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree *Masters of Arts* in Clinical Psychology at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University

Supervisor: Dr K du Plooy
Co-Supervisor: Prof C Venter

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SECTION 1

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Lord for giving me the power and ability to complete this task. All the glory be to You.

To Kobus, thank you for your support, guidance and patience. Your hard work has not gone unnoticed.

Thank you to the NWU Psychology Department for the opportunity to complete my studies.

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Summary

Communication in the marital relationship and its particular predictive relationship to marital quality and satisfaction has been widely researched (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). However despite it being widely researched, the researcher was unable to find a systematic review summarizing these findings. The aim of the current study was therefore to summarize the available research within the parameters of the indicated inclusion criteria on aspects of communication which contribute to high levels of marital satisfaction.

A rapid systematic review was conducted by two researchers over the course of a four week period. The search was limited to articles which were published between 2005 and 2015, specifically articles which reported on qualitative and quantitative empirical data to which the NWU full text was available. Initial results revealed 103 articles, following which 60 of these were excluded based on initial screening by the researchers. Of these 43 remaining studies which abstracts' were screened, 23 more were excluded based on their not meeting the inclusion criteria. Thereafter 20 full text articles were screened by utilizing the NICE guidelines. A further 5 were subsequently excluded and 15 articles were finally included in the present study. The quality of included articles was appraised by two researchers by utilizing the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines. The results of the quality appraisal were then compared using a Kappa K rating, and only articles for which a Kappa K rating of .7 was included.

The results of the current study highlighted the important role of communication activities, positive interactions in general and conflict interactions, communication skills and affect, gender and socioeconomic factors on promoting high levels of marital satisfaction. In conclusion this study underlined the importance of positive interactions on high levels of marital satisfaction. The findings of this rapid review support and correlate with theories and existing literature, namely that communication plays an integral part in married couples'

levels of marital satisfaction. The findings also highlighted that communication plays a significant and intricate role in marital satisfaction, both on a direct and indirect manner. Results emphasize the importance of how married couples communicate rather what they say to be particularly important in this regard.

The results of this study possibly implicate the need for future research on aspects of communication which relate to high levels of marital satisfaction. It may further have implications for psychotherapists or those involved in marital therapy to place more emphasis on promoting effective communication within relationships during marital therapy.

Keywords: communication, high marital satisfaction, systematic review

Opsomming

Die rol van kommunikasie binne die huweliksverhouding het 'n besondere een 'n voorspellende verhouding tot huwelikskwaliteit en huweliksbevrediging is al wydliks nagevors (Karney&Bradbury, 1995). Ten spyte hiervan kon die navorser nie 'n sistematieseorsig kry wat hierdie bevindinge opsom nie. Die doel van hierdiestudie was dus om beskikbare navorsing op te som binne die perke van die insluitingskriteria oor watter aspekte van kommunikasie bydra tot hoë vlakke van huweliksbevrediging.

'nVinnige sistematieseorsig was uitgevoer deur twee navorsers oor die tydperk van vier weke. Die soektog was beperk tot artikels wat gepubliseer is tussen 2005 en 2015, wat verslag lewer op empiriese kwalitatiewe en kwantitatiewe data, asook waarvan die volledige teks beskikbaar was. Aanvanklike resultate het 103 artikels opgelewer, nadat die eerste keuringgedoen is, is 60 artikels geëlimineer wat nie aan die insluitingskriteria voldoen het nie. Na 'n meer noukeurige ondersoek was nog 23ge-elimineerwat ook nie geval het binne die perke van die insluitingskriteria nie. Die navorsers het 20 artikels se volledige teks gekeur deur gebruik te maak van die National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) riglyne. Na hierdie proses was 5 artikels uitgesluit en die twee navorsers het ooreengestem op 'n finale aantal van 15 artikels wat ingesluit is in die huidige studie.

Die kwaliteit van die artikels wat ingesluit is was bepaal deur gebruik te maak van die NICE riglyne. Die resultate van die kwaliteitsevaluering is vergelyk deur gebruik te maak van Kappa K meting, waarvan slegs artikels ingesluit is indien die Kappa K meting 0.7 of meer was. Die resultate van die huidige studie het die belangrike rol van kommunikasieaktiwiteite, positiewe interaksies oor die algemeen en tyd en konfliktsituasies, kommunikasie vaardighede & affek, geslag en sosio-ekonomiese faktore op hoë vlakke om huweliksbevrediging te bevorder beklemtoon. Ter opsomming lig hierdie studie die belangrikheid uit van positieweinteraksies op hoëvlakke van huwelikstevredenheid. Die bevindinge van die

vinnige oorsig ondersteun en korreleer met teorieë en bestaande literatuur wat aandui dat kommunikasie 'n integrale rol speel in paartjies se vlakke van huweliksbevrediging. Die blyk dat kommunikasie 'n beduidende rol speel in huwelikstevredenheid, beide op 'n direkte en indirekte wyse, asook dat hoe paartjies kommunikeer belangriker is as wat hulle se tydensinteraksies. Die implikasies van die huidige studie dui moontlik op die noodsaaklikheid vir verder navorsing op die aspekte wat 'n rol speel op hoëvlakke van huweliksbevrediging. Dit mag verder ook implikasies inhou vir sielkundiges en die wie betrokke is by die berading van huweliks paartjies om meer klem te plaas op die bevordering van effektiewe kommunikasie binne verhoudings tydens huweliksterapie.

Sleutelwoorde: kommunikasie, hoëhuweliksbevrediging, sistematiese oorsig

Preface**Article Format**

This mini-dissertation form part of the requirements for the completion of the Master of Arts degree in Clinical Psychology. It was submitted in article format in adherence to rule A.5.4.2.7 of the North-West University, Potchefstroom campus yearbook.

Journal

This mini-dissertation was compiled according to the guidelines set out by the Journal of Psychology in Africa. The APA (American Psychological Association, 6th edition) style was used for the manuscript and reference list and these specifications were adhered to for the purpose of examination. Where the author guidelines differ from the APA publication guidelines, relevant amendments will be made prior to publication.

Page Numbers

For the purpose of examination, page numbering follows from the title page and proceed from here onwards.

Guidelines for Authors

Author Guidelines: Journal of Psychology in Africa

The Journal of Psychology in Africa publishes original empirical research articles, research reviews, conceptual development articles and thematic issues. Manuscripts can be regular research reports, brief reports, and those that address topical professional issues, including case analysis reports. Book reviews are accepted for publication as special announcements. Specifically, manuscripts with the following qualities are encouraged: 1) Combine quantitative and qualitative data; 2) Take a systematic qualitative or ethnographic approach; 3) Use an original and creative methodological approach; 4) Address an important but overlooked topic; 5) Present new theoretical or conceptual ideas; and 6) Present innovative context sensitive applications. Manuscript for publication consideration should show an awareness of the cultural context of the research questions asked, the measures used, the results obtained, and interpretations proposed. Finally, the papers should be practical, based on local experience and applicable to crucial efforts in key areas of psychology for development in African cultural heritage settings.

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By submitting to JPA for publication review, the author(s) agree to any originality checks during the peer review and production processes. A manuscript is accepted for publication review on the understanding that it contains nothing that is abusive, defamatory, fraudulent, illegal, libelous, or obscene. During manuscript submission, authors should declare any competing and/or relevant financial interest which might be potential sources of bias or constitute conflict of interest. The submitting author must provide contact information for all co-authors. The author who submits the manuscript accepts responsibility for notifying all co-authors and must provide contact information on the co-authors. The Editor-in-Chief and Associate Editors will collaborate with Taylor and Francis using the guidelines of the Committee on Publication Ethics [<http://publicationethics.org>] in cases of allegations of research errors, authorship complaints, multiple or concurrent (simultaneous) submission, plagiarism complaints, research results misappropriation, reviewer bias, and undisclosed conflicts of interest.

Manuscripts

Manuscripts should be submitted in English. The manuscripts should be typewritten and double-spaced, with wide margins, using one side of the page only. Manuscripts should conform to the publication guidelines of the latest edition of the American Psychological Association (APA) publication manual of instructions for authors.

Submission

Manuscripts should be submitted to the Editor-in-Chief, Journal of Psychology in Africa, Elias Mpfu, PhD., DEd, CRC, Professor, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of

Sydney, Cumberland Campus, East Street, PO Box 170, Lidcombe, NSW 1825, Australia, email: elias.mpofu@sydney.edu.au. We encourage authors to submit manuscripts via e-mail, in MS Word, but we also require two hard copies of any e-mail submission. Before submitting a manuscript, authors should peruse and consult a recent issue of the Journal of Psychology in Africa for general layout and style. Manuscripts should conform to the publication guidelines of the latest edition of the American Psychological Association (APA) publication manual of instructions for authors.

Manuscript Format

All pages must be numbered consecutively, including those containing the references, tables and figures. The typescript of a manuscript should be arranged as follows:

- Title: this should be brief, sufficiently informative for retrieval by automatic searching techniques and should contain important keywords, (preferably <13 words).
- Author(s) and address(es) of author(s): The corresponding author must be indicated. The author's respective addresses where the work was done must be indicated. An e-mail address, telephone number and fax number for the corresponding author must be provided.
- Abstract: Articles and abstracts must be in English. Submission of abstracts translated to French, Portuguese and/or Spanish is encouraged. For data-based contributions, the abstract should be structured as follows: Objective - the primary purpose of the paper, Method - data source, participants, design, measures, data analysis, Results - key findings, implications, future directions and Conclusions - in relation to the research questions and theory development. For all other contributions (except editorials, book reviews, special announcements) the abstract must be a

concise statement of the content of the paper. Abstracts must not exceed 150 words.

The statement of the abstract should summarize the information presented in the paper but should not include references.

- Text:

(1) Do not align text using spaces or tabs in references. Use one of the following:

(a) use CTRL-T in Word 2007 to generate a hanging indent; or

(b) MS Word allows author to define a style (e.g., reference) that will create the correct formatting.

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either 80 or 175mm. (3.5 or 7.0"). Complicated symbols or patterns must be avoided. Graphs and histograms should preferably be two-dimensional and scale marks should be provided. All lines should be black but not too heavy or thick (including boxes). Color only in photos or color sensitive graphic illustrations. Extra charges will be levied for color printing.

Structure of the dissertation

This dissertation will be submitted in article format in accordance with the General Regulation A.13.7 of the North-West University. As such it will be structured as follows:

- Section 1: This section will include the rationale for the study, a brief literature orientation, the aim and structure of the study.
- Section 2: Research article: The relationship between communication and high levels of marital satisfaction: A systematic review. This article will be submitted for publication in the Journal for Psychology in Africa. This section as well as its accompanying reference list included at the end of the section was compiled in accordance with the guidelines of the Journal for Psychology in Africa indicated on page 10 of the dissertation.
- Section 3: Critical reflection

Declaration and Permission to Submit Article for Examination Purposes

This mini-dissertation serves as fulfilment for the degree Magister Scientiae in Clinical Psychology at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University. I, the supervisor of this study hereby declare that the article entitled: **“The relationship between communication and high levels of marital satisfaction: A systematic review”**, written by Ronél de Beer, does reflect the research regarding the subject matter. The co-author of the article that forms part of the mini-dissertation, namely Kobus du Plooy (supervisor and co-author), hereby grant permission to the candidate, Ronél de Beer, to include the article as part of a Master’s dissertation and that the candidate may submit the article for publication in The Journal of Psychology in Africa. The contribution of the co-author (advisory and supportive) was kept within reasonable limits, thereby enabling the candidate to submit this mini-dissertation for examination purposes.

Dr Kobus du Plooy

Supervisor and Co-author

Brief Literature Orientation

Introduction

Communication and romantic relationships have received academic attention from various researchers in the past (Madahi, Samadzadeh & Javidi, 2013), and still continues to attract the attention of current researchers. In the following paragraphs, some of their findings will be discussed.

Conceptualising communication and high marital satisfaction

The aim of this brief literature orientation is to familiarise the reader to the problem statement as set out in the manuscript.

This will be executed by firstly discussing communication, followed by romantic relationships and communication as basic human needs and will be concluded with a discussion on the marital relationship.

Communication

There are many factors which influence the dynamic process of marital satisfaction, such as the involved parties' attachment styles, problem-solving abilities, a sense of love and emotional bond, marital violence, spending time together, and communication skills, to name but a few (Canel, 2013; Egeci & Gençöz, 2006). The purpose of this study was to focus on the effect of communication on marital satisfaction, given their significant association (Egeci & Gençöz, 2006).

Interpersonal communication consists of various elements, the most essential being: (i) source-receiver (ii) competence, (iii) message, (iv) encoding and decoding, (v) channel, (vi) context, (vii) noise, and (viii) ethics (DeVito, 2009). Within communication a further distinction can be made between content and process, where content refers to the verbal and non-verbal message, while process refers to how individuals are manoeuvring one another

through their verbal and non-verbal communication (Vorster, 2011). This manoeuvring element may be responsible for creating a change in feeling, thought and behaviour in both parties when communicating (Vorster, 2011).

Due to its many intricate components, defining communication can be done in numerous manners, depending on one's point of punctuation. For the purpose of this study, the process of interpersonal communication will be described as: "the accurate conveying of a message from one individual (the sender) to another (the receiver) through verbal and non-verbal signals, the message being the information that is being conveyed from the sender to the receiver" (Vorster, 2011, p. 113). After sending a message, it is decoded (interpreted, seen and heard) by the receiver within his/her own frame of reference (Vorster, 2011). Within the process of communication the sender has a certain thought he/she wishes to convey, and this thought is transformed into words, which might be done at varying skill levels (Vorster, 2011).

Interpersonal skills refer to "a process in which the individual implements a set of goal-directed, inter-related, situational appropriate social behaviour which is learned and controlled" (Hargie, 2006). The terms communication skills, interpersonal skills and social skills are often used interchangeably, to avoid confusion and promote consistency this study will refer to communication skills (Hargie, 2011). Being able to communicate competently has been shown to influence the quality of a relationship on several instances (Barry et al., 2008; Romanis, 2011). Communication skills play an essential role in the process of expressing one's own thoughts and emotions as well as understanding the thoughts and emotions of others (Mamak, 2013). Failing to do so effectively may give rise to personal and interpersonal problems (Mamak, 2013). It is further noted that importance of communication transcend into the behavioural domain as it plays a vital role for individuals in the process of behaviour change (Çetinkaya & Alparslan, 2011).

Hayman (2001) found that distressed married couples are more likely to display negative communication patterns. For the purpose of this study, “negative” communication will refer to communication which is associated with negative affect, whereas “positive” communication will refer to communication which is associated with positive affect. However, not all negative interactions tend to predict marital dissolution, but rather those interactions where communication is depicted by criticism, defensiveness, contempt and withdrawal, frequently referred to as the four apocalyptic horsemen (Driver & Gottman, 2004; Doohan, 2013). The ‘balance theory’ proposes that couples can enjoy happy and fulfilling marriages permitted that their positive to negative ratio of communication is 5:1 in conflict situations. It is when negative communication outweighs positive communication that marriages tend to become unsteady and at risk of divorce (Gottman, 1993, as cited in Doohan, 2013). Research suggest that negative communication holds a particular predictive value of marital outcome, and further stated that non-distressed married couples handle painful emotions more optimally as opposed to distressed married couples (Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan & Witton, 2010).

Empathic responding is an example of positive communication, opposite to negative communication. This refers to understanding another person within their unique frame of reference, or their perspective, and communicating this understanding to them in a manner that makes them feel understood (Vorster, 2011). Empathic responding serves a multitude of purposes within distressed family and marital contexts, such as preventing and managing conflict, minimising blaming statements while further maintaining intimacy, closeness and relationship satisfaction and quality (Davis, 1994; Gottman, 1998; O’Brien & DeLongis, as cited in O’Brien, DeLongis, Pomaki, Puterman & Zwicker, 2009).

A romantic relationship and communication as basic human needs

Forming romantic relationships have psychological, genetic, and goal-oriented driving components motivating its formation. The theories of Maslow (1954) and McClelland and Johnson (1984) describe the psychological importance of forming meaningful relationships. Maslow (1954) states that a sense of love and belonging is a basic human need, while McClelland and Johnson (1984) indicate that our need for affiliation serves as a factor which motivates human behaviour. On further importance is the works of Daniel Levinson (1980) and Erik Erikson (1950) both further punctuate that establishing a romantic relationship is one of the primary developmental goals for young adults. These theories emphasise that young adults are looking to find a partner with whom to share their lives. Although these theories are dated several years ago it appears that they may remain relevant as recent research also found that young adults consider forming romantic relationships to be a critical indicator of adulthood themselves (Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007, as cited in Rauer, Pettit, Lansford, Bates & Dodge, 2013).

From a biological perspective, current research found that romantic love can be explained as a natural drive with a genetic underpinning which contributes to procreation and the survival of the species (Fletcher, Simpson, Campbell & Overall, 2015). The multiple theories and research listed above include psychological, genetic and goal-oriented drives for establishing romantic relationships, from which the researcher concluded that forming optimal and meaningful romantic relationships is a fundamental part of human existence. Although other relationships may also satisfy this apparent, deep-seated human need for bonding, the marital relationship may fulfil it to a greater extent (Fincham, Paleari & Regalia, 2002).

Like romantic relationships, communication is another essential element of human existence that can be regarded as a complex phenomenon with numerous elements (Hargie,

2006). Verderber and Verderber (2013) indicate that one of the functions of interpersonal communication is to share meaning. This takes place when the receiver interprets the message similar to the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of the sender (Verderber & Verderber, 2013). Research on listening dyads found that a speaker's greatest desire is for the listener to truly understand and empathise with him/her (Halone & Pecchioni, 2001). This desire touches on a fundamental theme underlying communication, namely inter-subjectivity, which refers to the attempts to both understand and be understood (Hewes, 1995).

The marital relationship

Houston's three-level model was created using various theories as well as empirical findings from 2003-2013, now providing an understanding of 21st century marriages (Helms, 2013). In essence, Houston's model identifies three key elements that are used to understand a marriage: 1) marital behaviour/intra-dyadic, 2) individual properties, and 3) macro-environment (Helms, 2013). Together, these elements dynamically influence one another, and consequently affect marital stability. Communication patterns rest within micro-behavioural patterns of interaction, which eventually influence macro-behaviour, such as leisure and other spousal activities. These intra-dyadic/marital behaviours further interact with the two other elements, namely: individual elements (such as each one's beliefs and feelings about marriage), and the macro-environment (which includes spouses' ecological niche and macro-societal context). The model is included to stress the complex dynamics of the marriage, and to point out where communication slots in within these dynamics.

Entering into a marriage holds certain potential psychological tasks, such as consolidating psychological separation and establishing new connections with a family of origin; building togetherness and creating autonomy; exploring sexual love and intimacy; providing emotional nurturance; sharing laughter and keeping interest alive; coping with crises; creating a safe place for conflict; becoming parents and preserving a double vision,

which serves a purpose for individuals (Brown & Brown, 2002).

Marital satisfaction refers to “the degree to which an individual’s needs, expectations, and desires are being satisfied in their marriage – a subjective condition which can only be described by the individual spouse, an individual’s personal overall evaluation of his or her marriage” (Idemudia & Ndlovu, 2013, p. 5487). This construct is used synonymously with marital well-being, marital adjustment, marital happiness and marital quality (Canel, 2013; Iafrate et al., 2013; Li & Fung, 2011). Marital satisfaction includes dynamic processes which change as married couples are faced with different situations, stressors and personal growth of the individuals in the relationship (Canel, 2013; Compton, 2005).

Conclusion

From the literature on communication and marital satisfaction it is apparent that these constructs influence one another and remain relevant in marital relationships. The literature discussed above provides evidence that communicating and forming relationships are basic human needs. However, it seems that meeting these needs are not without potential pitfalls, as many married couples struggle with relational difficulties and especially communication difficulties. This study may uncover the complexity of the dynamics of communicating within the marital relationship.

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SECTION II

Manuscript for examination

The relationship between communication and high levels of marital satisfaction:

A systematic review

Ronél de Beer

P.O. Box 5565, Kockspark, 2523

roneldebeer030@gmail.com

Kobus Du Plooy

Institute of Psychology & Wellbeing (IPW)

Community Psychosocial Research (COMPRES)

North-West University, Potchefstroom Campus

School for Psychosocial Behavioural Sciences

kobusduplooy@nwu.ac.za

Abstract

Despite the fact that communication has been widely researched in order to determine and predict relationship satisfaction (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), it appears that there is still no systematic review to summarise these findings. The aim of the current study was to summarise the best available research on aspects of communication which relate to high levels of marital satisfaction. A rapid systematic review was conducted by two researchers over the course of a four-week period. The quality of included articles was ensured by utilising the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines (NICE, 2012). A total number of 15 articles were included for the review. Results highlight the importance of communication activities, positive interactions during conflict interactions, communication skill and affect, gender, and socio-economic factors on high levels of marital satisfaction. In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of positive interactions in high levels of marital satisfaction as well as the need for further research into this field. It further informs professionals involved with marital therapy / counselling to emphasise the promotion of effective communication as part of such therapeutic / counselling interventions.

Keywords: communication, high marital satisfaction, systematic review, marital therapy

Introduction

What makes a good life? Robert Waldinger from Harvard Medical University explained pertinent aspects to answering this question in a TED talk. This on-going longitudinal study has lasted more than 75 years and included several generations of researchers to answer the questions of what keeps human beings healthy throughout life? A sample of more than 724 men since the 1930's that either were from Harvard, or from very low socio-economic backgrounds in Boston have been included. These participants' happiness, mental wellbeing and general health have been regularly assessed. Results have found that what kept them happy and healthy was the quality of the relationships they had developed with their friends and family (Waldinger, 2015).

Of all the most important relationships in the lives of human beings, the marital relationship remains one of the most common and important to most individuals in various societies (Bloch, Haase & Levenson, 2014). Early theorists indicate that the basic underpinnings of this relationship to be intimacy, commitment and passion (Sternberg, 1986, 2006). Furthermore, these underpinnings are communicated through verbal and non-verbal messages (Wood, 2015, Thompson-Hayes & Webb, 2008). From the aforementioned it can be concluded that communication forms critical component of a marital relationship, which in turn makes it a crucial part of contributing to the happiness and health of human beings involved in these relationships. The current study therefore set out to investigate communication and its relation to high levels of marital satisfaction. In order to achieve this aim the researchers set out to summarise the best available existing evidence relating to which aspects of communication contributed to high levels of marital satisfaction. Although marriage is by no means regarded as the only important form of romantic relationship, marital satisfaction was chosen in the light of increasing global divorce statistics and the possible related effects thereof to society (Amato, 2000, Statistics South Africa, 2012)

Marriage and other forms of romantic relationships

Marriage has traditionally been and is still regarded as one of the legitimate options for couples to organise themselves and reproduce, especially in so called Westernised societies such as the United States (Helms, 2013). For some couples entering into a marriage is seen as an act of commitment to the romantic relationship, however for other couples marriage is irrelevant. As such alternatives to the marital relationship that is commonly found in societies also include (but are not limited to) cohabitating heterosexual relationships, same sex relationships, same sex marriages and polyamory (Light & Omori, 2013). The choice of which of the aforementioned relationship options (or potential others) individuals may choose to engage in with a life partner may be influenced by a multitude of factors such as their personal orientation towards marriage. Marital orientation refers to how a person views marriage as an organization as well as such an individual's thoughts and feelings regarding their current life partner (Light & Omori, 2013). Marital orientation is seen to influence the direction and dynamics of a romantic relationship and as so many alternatives exist, it would make it nearly impossible to evaluate all of them for the purpose of a single study. As it is still regarded as one of the most common forms of a romantic relationship, the researchers chose to limit the scope of the present study to only include the marital relationship. It is hoped that this study will spark further similar research into the other forms of romantic relationships as well in the future.

The benefits of optimal marital relationships

The optimal marital relationship not only fulfils this need for bonding but is also characteristically an intimate, trusting relationship where married couples love and care for one another, and which creates a profound sense of connection and belonging (Compton, 2005; Baumgardner & Crothers, 2014; Hindman, 2015). Married couples who share mutual high levels of marital satisfaction report lower levels of stress, are better able to cope with adverse living conditions, and tend to have higher levels of social support than divorced individuals (Canel, 2013; Shoko, 2011). Marital satisfaction also strongly correlates with

physical health and personal well-being; for example, it has been found that married South African women have a mortality advantage over single, widowed, and divorced females (Iafrate, Bertoni & Donate, 2013; Shoko, 2011).

According to Wood (1995), becoming proficient in communication is critical to the process of building and sustaining intimacy as most tensions between intimates result from ineffective communication and many problems can be addressed and managed when partners develop affirming, effective ways of communicating with one another. Available literature has further confirmed the aforementioned as it revealed that effective marital communication is positively correlated with marital satisfaction and is considered to be of great importance to healthy married couples (Carroll, Hill, Yorgason, Larson & Sandberg, 2013; Egeci & Gençöz, 2006; Brown & Brown, 2002; Vorster, 1981). Effective communication has also been shown to have a positive correlation with other relationships being maintained and to predict future marital satisfaction (Malouff, Mundy, Galea & Bothma, 2015; Markman, as cited in Brown & Brown, 2002). A possible explanation for this association may be that factors such as love, commitment and trust are expressed to the other party by means of communication (Stearns, 2014). The question therefore emerges as to what constitutes effective marital communication?

According to Brown and Brown (2002) the rules for effective marital communication includes speaking to each other in the first person; being honest with one another; listening to one another without interruptions; stating one's complaint concisely; avoiding assumptions or "mind reading"; clearly describing what one needs; showing appreciation and speaking in a moderate to soft volume. When considering how important effective communication appears to be in promoting marital satisfaction and the health of the parties involved it comes as no surprise that some marital therapists have placed a large emphasis on enhancing couples

‘communication skills as part of marital/couple’s therapy (Walitzer, Dermen, Shyhalla & Kubiak 2013).

Problem Statement

From the aforementioned it is evident that obtaining and maintaining high marital satisfaction through effective communication skills are beneficial to subjective well-being, and satisfies a deep human need for closeness to another individual (Fincham, Paleari & Regalia, 2002). In recent years evidence has however started to suggest that contemporary couples are delaying entering in to marriages more frequently and that overall marriage rates are declining (Helms, 2013). This is also true in the South African context as it was indicated in the Annual Report of the Department of Justice that there was a 28% increase of divorces between 2012 and 2013, while the number of new registered marriages had also declined (Statistics South Africa, 2012). Furthermore, divorce not only effects adults, but also children, as 19 713 minor children were also affected by divorce in 2012 alone (Statistics South Africa, 2012). Along with this increasing divorce rate non-marital cohabitation and childrearing has also increased in the recent past (Helms, 2013).

Decreasing levels of marital satisfaction may be one explanation for the aforementioned trends as marital dissatisfaction has been found to be a major cause for divorce (Li & Fung, 2011). These changes cause concern from a psychological perspective when considering that the quality of the marital relationship is one of the strongest predictors of subjective well-being (Compton, 2005). Along with these changes in marital patterns, scholarly attention to marriage & divorce has almost doubled between 2003 and 2013 as Helms (2013) explained:

“Clearly, marriage has been and continues to: (a) maintain symbolic importance

for individuals living within and outside it, (b) be an important focus of scientific inquiry, and (c) generate significant public interest and debate. Simply put, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, marriage continues to matter". (p. 233)

Communication in relation to marital satisfaction

As highlighted throughout this paper, communication has been found to be strongly related to marital satisfaction (Carroll et al., 2013; Egeci & Gençöz, 2006). The majority of available literature however appeared to have focussed primarily on the relationship between ineffective communication and marital dissatisfaction and/or divorce as Fincham, Stanley and Beach (2007) reported that too much research emphasis has been placed on marital conflict and as such proposed that positive/optimal marital communication be researched instead. Despite the fact that communication has been widely researched in order to determine and predict relationship satisfaction (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), it appears that there is no systematic review to summarize the available findings. A systematic review was therefore proposed to summarize relevant research findings. It is hoped that these findings will theoretically contribute to the research available on communication and marital satisfaction, in particular communication and its relationship to marital satisfaction as well as to prompt future research in this area. In this manner it is hoped that the findings will also be of assistance to those involved in the practice of marital counselling and therapy.

Aim

The aim of this study was to systematically review and synthesise the available empirical research on the aspects of communication that contribute to high levels of marital satisfaction.

Objectives

The following objectives were selected to achieve the aim of the present study:

- (i) Systematically review research on the aspects of communication which contribute to high levels of marital satisfaction.
- (ii) Synthesise the findings.
- (iii) Make recommendations based on the findings to be used both on a theoretical and practical level while taking into account the limitations of the research. On a theoretical level the objective was to summarise available research evidence; in so doing contributing to research on communication in order to promote marital satisfaction. On a practical level the objective was to assist those who treat married couples with low marital satisfaction in practice accompanied, such as psychologists and social workers.

Method

It was the belief of the researchers that the aim of this research was best achieved by a systematic review as Boland, Gemma Cherry and Dickons (2014) indicated that a systematic review is the best method to synthesise findings from different studies which examine similar questions. Bambra (2011) defines this design as “a systematic process of locating research and critically evaluating it on the grounds of relevancy and predetermined methodological criteria” (p. 15). From the various existing forms of systematic reviews the rationale for utilising a rapid systematic review in the present study was to decrease time spent reviewing articles whilst still providing scientifically sound research findings which could add value to individuals in practice as well as to highlight areas requiring further research (Schünemann & Moja, 2015). A rapid review was further deemed sufficient for the completion of a mini-dissertation. According to Tricco et al. (2015), the core principles of a systematic review should still be adhered to in a rapid review, and the process should remain transparent. In essence, the same result can be achieved with both methods. For the purpose of this rapid review, articles were reviewed for 4 weeks following ethical approval for the research by the

Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) of North West University (NWU). Transparency was also ensured by adhering to the PRISMA criteria (Tricco et al., 2015).

Keyword search

Two researchers were involved who simultaneously performed a search of the literature over a 4 week period. An NWU librarian was also consulted to assist them in the process.

The following keywords were used in the search:

- (i) (communicat*) OR (interact*) OR (listen*)
- (ii) AND (marital satisfaction) OR (marital well-being) OR (marital quality) OR (marital happiness)
- (iii) AND marriage
- (iv) NOT child* OR adolescent

Keywords were followed by an asterisk (*), which allowed the search engine to include different variations of the keyword, therefore ensuring that all relevant data could be extracted. Boolean operators such as AND, OR, and NOT were also used to help clarify the search. Articles were retrieved from various databases, including the following: PsycINFO, PsychARTICLES, JSTOR Journals, and ScienceDirect.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Extracted articles adhered to the following inclusion criteria in an effort to enhance the scientific value of the study:

- (i) Articles were no more than 10 years old (entries from 2005 until 2015).
- (ii) Only articles that focused on high marital satisfaction and communication skills, styles and patterns were included.
- (iii) The participants in each study had to be aged 18 years and older.
- (iv) Only full text articles were included.
- (v) Only peer reviewed articles were included.

- (vi) Articles had to be written in English or Afrikaans as these were the only languages in which both the researchers are proficient.
- (vii) Only articles which reported on primary empirical data were included.
- (viii) National as well as international studies were included.
- (ix) Specific measures used for Marital Satisfaction and Communication skills had to be stated.
- (x) Only sample sizes of 8 or more were included.

The exclusion criteria for articles, also used in an effort to enhance the scientific value of the study, were:

- (i) Articles that focused on constructs other than those which were being researched for this study.
- (ii) Conference proceedings.
- (iii) Articles published before 2005.
- (v) Reviews.
- (vi) Mixed-method studies.
- (vii) Articles not included in the inclusion criteria.

Critical appraisal of quality of selected studies

Once collected, both researchers critically appraised the selected articles by making use of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines (NICE, 2012). These guidelines were used to ensure that the rapid review was done in a rigorous scientific manner. These guidelines include three checklists, namely: quality appraisal checklist for qualitative studies (Appendix H); quality appraisal checklist for quantitative intervention studies (Appendix F) and the qualitative appraisal checklist for quantitative studies reporting correlations and associations (Appendix G), all of which are available on the NICE website. The checklists include items relating to the population; selection of participants; theoretical

basis for selecting explanatory variables; reliability of measures; appropriate data analysis; how well the study minimises sources of bias; and the generalisability of research results.

Each checklist makes use of three options to rate the quality of each item, which includes the symbols ++, + and -. The ++ symbol is allocated to relevant checklist items which were designed or conducted in a way which minimises bias; the + symbol is allocated when it was not clear from the way the study reported, or when the study may not have addressed all potential sources of bias; and the - symbol is allocated when checklist items were a significant source of bias. Two further rating options are also available, namely NR and NA. NR is used when the study did not report on the relevant item while NA is used when the item was not applicable for the relevant study. The present study used these ratings in the same manner. A representation of the number of studies screened as part of this study is depicted below in Figure 1:

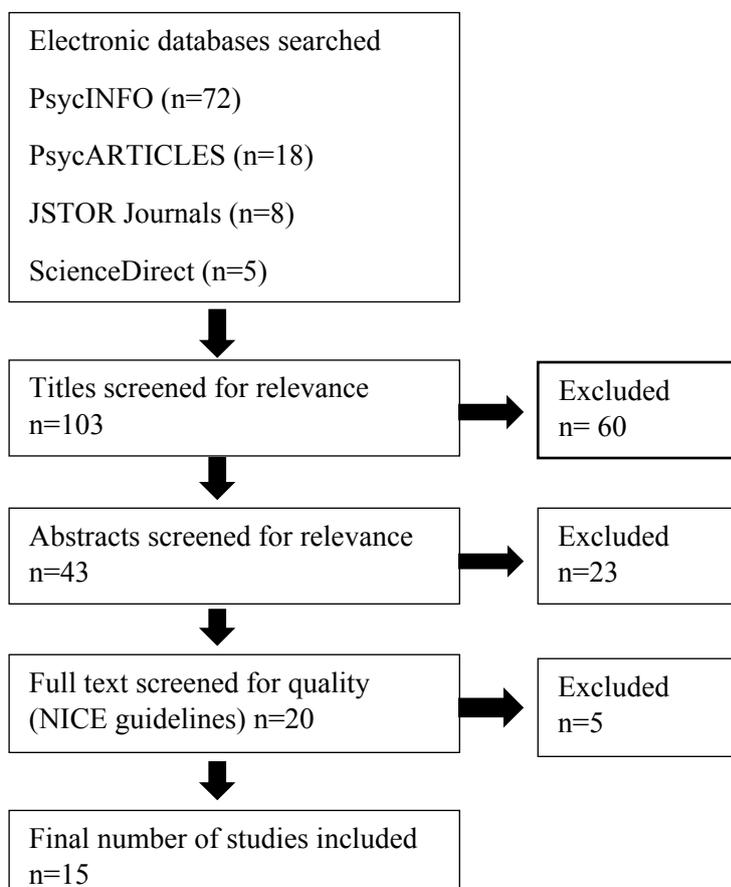


Figure 1- Search Flow Chart

As Figure 1 indicates initial results revealed 103 articles, of which 60 were excluded based on initial screening by both researchers. Of these 43 remaining studies whose abstracts were screened and 23 more were excluded based on their not meeting the inclusion criteria. Following full text screening of the remaining 20 articles by means of the NICE guidelines, 5 more were excluded and 15 articles were finally included in the present study.

Data extraction & analysis

For the purpose of analysing qualitative and quantitative evidence, qualitative synthesis was used. Qualitative synthesis refers to “any methodology whereby study findings are systematically interpreted through a series of expert judgements to represent the meaning of the collected work. In a qualitative synthesis, the findings of qualitative studies – and quantitative research – are pooled” (Bearman & Dawson, 2013, p. 253).

There are a number of approaches to qualitative synthesis, for example thematic analysis, meta-ethnography, and realist review, to name but a few (Bearman & Dawson, 2013). For this study, thematic analysis in particular was used. Quantitative data were analysed by extracting the meaning of the quantitative synthesis (Bearman & Dawson, 2013). Therefore, the meaning of the extracted quantitative studies were presented in text format and allowed for these studies to be analysed with qualitative data. Once all the data were converted to text format, thematic analysis was performed.

Thematic analysis is an inductive type of analysis which refers to the processes of refining texts into key themes (Bearman & Dawson, 2013). This is a realist approach which leans toward summarising data and shares clear overlaps with narrative summaries and content analysis (Bearman & Dawson, 2013, Dixon-Woods, Agarwal, Jones, Young & Sutton, 2005). This approach was selected by the researchers as it was deemed to be the most appropriate method to use in the present rapid review due to its tendency towards summarizing data and being less time-consuming than other methods. In executing the

thematic analysis, prominent themes were identified, after which findings of different studies were summarized under thematic headings (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005). “Thematic analysis allows clear identification of prominent themes, and organised and structured ways of dealing with the literature under these themes. It is flexible, allowing considerable latitude to reviewers and a means of integrating qualitative and quantitative evidence” (Dixon-Woods et al., 2005, p. 47).

Validity and reliability

This study was conducted in a thoughtful, well-planned and transparent manner. The participation of two independent reviewers enhanced this study’s trustworthiness and ensured scientific rigour. A Cohen’s Kappa rating was also calculated for inter-coder reliability and only studies with a substantial coder agreement of at least .7 were included (Viera & Garret, 2005).

A systematic review’s validity can significantly be influenced by risk of bias. For this study, risk of bias was addressed with the decision of which studies the researchers should incorporate into the study. Therefore, the current study included studies that:

- (i) had different contexts;
- (ii) included national and international studies;
- (iii) were written in different languages (Afrikaans and English);
- (iv) employed various research methods; and
- (v) selectively reported on all results.

Ethical concerns

Due to the nature of this research, no human participants were involved and therefore entailed a minimal ethical risk. The benefits of this research included promoting marital satisfaction by locating the best available evidence for aspects which contributes to marital satisfaction, such as empathic marital communication. Therefore, the risk/benefit ratio

implied that this study held more potential benefits than possible risks. Despite this study only including published research studies and no human participants, it nevertheless still aimed to avoid misconduct and to remain transparent. These aims were executed by means of the following implementations (Wager & Wiffen, 2011):

- (i) Redundant publication was avoided by submitting this article to an academic journal.
- (ii) The researcher and her study leader documented all activities in a pre-determined structured document which is available on request. If any conflict of interest should have arisen which may have potentially caused bias, the reviewer would have reported on this immediately and the necessary actions would subsequently have been taken.
- (iii) The purpose of this study was not to evaluate a particular type of intervention, as is typical with systematic reviews but rather to attempt to provide the best available evidence regarding the topic. This was ensured by the data being extracted by two independent reviewers, with a third reviewer having been available for consultation should any disagreement have arisen. This reviewer was not utilized as no disagreements arose.
- (iv) Should it have occurred during the reviewing process that any of the reviewers suspected plagiarism, whether for an entire article or substantial sections of it, such similarities would have been reported to the publishers of the journals immediately. No reports of this kind were made throughout the research process.

Results

In total, fifteen studies were included which adhered to the inclusion criteria. These studies included both quantitative and qualitative studies, which obtained their data through various methods, including laboratory settings, self-report and partner report questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews. Table 1 provides a summary of the 15 included articles:

Table 1: Data extraction from articles included in the study

Study	Aim	Methodology	Sample characteristic	Measurements	Core findings
James, 2015	To examine the difference in trajectories of women's marital quality over the life course	Quantitative	10 waves of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-1979, born between 1957 and 1964 N=2604	Annual questionnaires using a between 1979 and 1994	Results emphasise the fundamental contribution of demographic and socio-economic characteristics on satisfaction
Gaines, Clark, Afful & Dainton, 2015	To examine the degree to which both positive and negative maintenance communication predict marital satisfaction.	Quantitative	N=90 in interracial marriages, who were recruited via SurveyMonkey's audience request 53 males and 36 females, one participant failed to report sex. The average age of participants was 44.9 years old.	One relational partner completed an online survey Norton's (1983) Quality Marriage Index was used to measure satisfaction, maintenance and commitment Stafford and Canary's (1991) six-item commitment scale was used to measure commitment	Results indicated that 52% of variance in satisfaction was predicted by four maintenance activities
Bloch, Haase & Levenson, 2014	To study the relationship between marital satisfaction and emotion regulation	Quantitative	82 middle aged, married couples, USA	3 waves of data obtained from a set of questionnaires and laboratory studies over the course of a 13-year longitudinal study	Wives benefited from down-regulating negative emotions whilst in a conflict situation, which point to the constructive communication used by wives as a mediating pathway
Zarch,	To examine	Quantitative	159	Bar-on Emotional	Across all

Marashi & Raji, 2014	various components of emotional intelligence and its relationship to marital satisfaction as observed in three different economic classes	ve	Isfahanian couples	Intelligence (1997) and Enrich Marital Satisfaction (1989)	classes general mood was seen to be the most effective factor for changing marital satisfaction
Yoshimura, 2013	To examine the extent to which the use of various response strategies relates to levels of marital quality and work-family life conflict	Quantitative	154 couples in United states, aged 20 to 67	Questionnaire	Two response strategies, namely: the denial-distortion response, and recalibration-reaffirmation, were significantly related to work-family life conflict
Lavner & Bradbury, 2010	Three main goals which included examining patterns of marital satisfaction by looking at time, maladaptive personality traits and gender differences	Quantitative	464 newlywed spouses and N=60, assessed over 4 years (on 8 occasions, 6 months apart)	8 self-reports of satisfaction, 3-hour laboratory sessions during which the couples participated in interaction tasks	As this study had 3 main goals, it had rich results It reports on distinct and predictable patterns of change as found in relationship satisfaction
Hanzel & Segrin, 2009	To investigate the role of negative affect and conflict styles on marital satisfaction as found in newly wedded couples	Quantitative	194 couples who have been married 1.61 years on average	Positive and Negative Affect Scale (PANAS); Conflict Resolution Styles Inventory (CRSI); and the Marital Quality Index (MQI)	This study emphasised the impact of communication processes in marital relationships on a dyadic level Negative affectivity was found to

					be related to one's own marital satisfaction
Barry et al., 2008	To study the interactive behaviour that emerges at the start of relationships and how these behaviours predict patterns of marital satisfaction	Quantitative	101 couples aged 18 to 55	Questionnaires including the Marital Adjustment Test (MAT) and the Relationship Domains Inventory (RDI), as well as laboratory sessions.	Couple behaviours were related to initial rates and levels of change in satisfaction, emphasising the unique contributions of various relational skills on the development of the marital relationship
Thompson-Hayes & Webb, 2008	To investigate the agreement between the conceptualisation of commitment theory of marital commitment and marital dyads' lived experience	Qualitative	17 marital dyads, mean age 50 years old; Americans	17 in-depth semi-structured interviews	Strong support was found for the conceptualisation of communication maintenance behaviour (the extent to which marital dyads successfully employ specific interaction activities to sustain, repair and redefine their relationship)
Cornelius & Alessi, 2007	To experimentally investigate the Speaker-Listener technique on marital satisfaction and communication behaviour while couples discuss a	Quantitative	30 couples	Self-report measures: Marital Adjustment Test (MAT); direct behaviour observational data-interaction Coding System, plus heart rate monitors to record physiological data	The Speaker-Listener technique was found to reduce negativity but did not increase positivity during marital interactions

	topic within or outside their marriage				
Bradbury et al., 2005	To examine the predictive power of specific skills and affective expressions on marital satisfaction as coded from problem-solving interactions between couples	Quantitative	172 newlywed couples from Los Angeles	Interactions were examined in relation to 8-wave, 4-year trajectories of marital satisfaction	A robust interaction was found between negative skill and positive affect.
Verhofstadt, Buysse, Ickes, De Clercq & Peene, 2005	To study the similarities and differences that emerged in couples' interaction behaviour and interaction-based cognitions in both conflict and support interactions	Quantitative	53 Belgian couples	Laboratory experiments (marital interaction Coding System. IV); self-report measures; Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) and online cognition by means of a 7-point rating scale.	Substantial similarities and differences were found between conflict and support interactions
Weger, 2005	To investigate the relationship between self-verification and communication in marriage	Quantitative	53 couples, USA	Communication Patterns Questionnaire (CPQ); Feelings of Understanding/Misunderstanding Scale (FUMS); and Quality Marriage Index (QMI)	Gender differences were observed by the degree to which self-verification influences marital satisfaction. When one partner withdraws from conflict the other partner feels less validated.
Ross, 2010	To examine whether highly satisfied couples also	Quantitative	Three couples that have married, divorced, and remarried the	60-item Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI) and the Spanier Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS).	Forgiveness was found to be a primary factor in high marital

	have high rates of forgiveness, as reported by themselves		same partner		satisfaction and served as a differentiating factor for reconciliation
Simmons, Gordon & Chambles, 2005	To determine whether the number of “self” and “other” pronouns used during problem solving discussions were indicative of marital health	Quantitative	59 couples, where one spouse in each couple had a psychiatric diagnosis	The Kategoriensystem Fur Partnerschaftliche Interaktion (KPI) was used to code dyadic interactions Text analysis was carried out using the LIWC computer system program, Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS)	The use of first-person singular pronouns had a positive association with marital satisfaction

The following themes emerged from the included articles:

Communication activities

Four studies refer to both communication behaviour and activities interchangeably which relate to high marital satisfaction (Gains et al., 2015; Thompson-Hayes & Webb, 2008; Weger, 2005; Zarch, Marashi & Raji, 2014). Married couples reported that the use of enacted behaviour, including communicative behaviour, assists them in maintaining their relationship. This includes the following activities: having fun and being playful; verbal and non-verbal expressions of affection; spending time together; talking every day; encouraging one another; displaying caring gestures and avoiding behaviour which may potentially irritate the other party (Thompson-Hayes & Webb, 2008). Communication activities such as small talk, giving support and gaining compliance were also reported to be related to relationship satisfaction (Weger, 2005). The same results emerged in another study which reported that spending more time together also led to the opportunity to talk more regularly (Zarch et al., 2014).

Various descriptions can be used to explain the aforementioned as Gains et al. (2015) utilised the description by Stafford and Canary (1991) of maintenance communication which

refers to uncovering five principal maintenance activities including assurance, positivity, openness, social networks, and sharing tasks. These activities can be uncovered by means of inductive and deductive methods. Results indicate that relationship satisfaction is mainly predicted by the perceptions held by partners who make use of maintenance communication. Furthermore, maintenance communication was found to be equally important for interracial and other couple types alike (Gaines et al., 2015).

Enacted communication

Another important phenomenon that emerged from the literature was that some qualities such as love, honesty, trust, and respect, which are enacted communicatively and likely the result of interaction, contributed to marital satisfaction. The themes which emerged from this research contained numerous communicative behaviours, therefore indirectly supporting the validity of a communication-based approach for marital commitment (Thompson-Hayes & Webb, 2008).

Positive exchanges

Four studies reported directly on the importance of what they referred to as “positive” communication exchanges between married couples and its effect on marital satisfaction (Hanzel & Segrin, 2009; Cornelius & Alessi, 2007; Bradbury et al., 2005; Verhofstadt, Buysse, Ickes, De Clercq & Peene, 2005). According to these studies “positive” exchanges generally refer to interactions between married couples which are perceived by both couples to be constructive. Hanzel and Segrin (2009) emphasises the importance and implications of partners engaging in such “positive” exchanges to enhance marital satisfaction. In this study, married couples who had higher levels of marital satisfaction reported the experience of their interactions as constructive and satisfactory (Verhofstadt et al., 2005). Variability in satisfying exchanges between partners was also seen to direct marital outcome (Bradbury et al., 2005). In order to promote long-term marital satisfaction, it was also found that prior to

starting communication skills training modules, married couples should preferably already possess a basic repertoire of “positive” exchanges in their interactions, such as displays of fondness and admiration (Cornelius & Alessi, 2007). One study also indirectly referred to “positive” exchanges between married to be the result of communication techniques (Yoshimura, 2013).

Effective interactions during conflict

Six studies reported on the significance of effective communication in conflict situations (Bloch, Haase & Levenson, 2014; Yoshimura, 2013; Gaines, Clark, Afful & Dainton, 2015; Hanzel & Segrin, 2009; Cornelius & Alessi, 2007; Simmons, Gordon & Chambless, 2005). There are certain techniques which were reported to reframe conflict situations, including the responses of recalibration and reaffirmation (R-R response), using we-pronouns, and the Listener-Speaker technique (Yoshimura, 2013; Simmons et al., 2005; Cornelius & Alessi, 2007). Responses of recalibration and reaffirmation (R-R) refer to an attitude change which focuses on the optimistic perspectives of the relevant tensions. The use of the R-R response was significantly related to a lower level of overall work-family conflict. Marital partners who made use of the technique whereby they framed conflict in a optimistic light found their marital relationship to be attributed with pleasant affect (Yoshimura, 2013).

The use of we-focussed pronouns was also related to effective problem-solving (Simmons et al., 2005). The Speaker-Listener technique is a technique which originated from client-centred therapy and has been adapted and used in many forms of marital therapy wherein spouses are encouraged to respond empathically when confronted by their partners in a conflict situation. Cornelius and Alessi (2007) found that when married couples utilised the Speaker-Listener technique, detrimental communication behaviour declined and they were more able to have optimal interactions.

Other skills found to be related to high marital satisfaction during conflict situations include active engagement, constructive communication, communication skill, down-regulation of negative emotions and effective problem solving (Yoshimura, 2013; Bloch et al., 2014; Gaines et al., 2015; Hanzel & Segrin, 2009). Married couples found it easier to manage tensions in their relationships when they were able to actively engage with one another and gain some sort of sense of control over the stressor (Yoshimura, 2013). Constructive communication is further seen to facilitate emotional regulation, which in turn favourably impacts on marital satisfaction. Examples of constructive communication include expressing feelings, discussing the problem at hand, suggesting possible solutions and also making compromises. Using this type of communication facilitates married couples' progress in solving underlying issues of conflict, and in doing so it predicts increases in marital satisfaction, particularly among wives (Bloch et al., 2014).

Down-regulation of painful emotional experiences

Marital satisfaction was found to be higher for both husbands and wives when wives displayed high levels of down-regulation of painful emotional experiences and behaviour following destructive conflict events. The down-regulation of painful emotions refers to the reduction of expressed painful emotions such as anger following an event that married couples perceived to be detrimental or potentially harmful to the relationship (Bloch et al., 2014). This was true for current marital satisfaction as well as predicted future marital satisfaction (Bloch et al., 2014). Moreover, communication skill was found to play a significant role in integrative conflict management, which is a predictive factor for marital satisfaction, especially among interracial married couples (Gaines et al., 2015). Making use of effective conflict management and social networks was also found to be strong predictors of marital satisfaction (Gaines et al., 2015). Both husbands and wives who reported mostly

making use of effective problem solving as a conflict resolution strategy also reported higher levels of marital satisfaction (Hanzel & Segrin, 2009).

Essential communication skills

Three studies reported that possessing essential communication skills were found to be strongly related to high marital satisfaction among marital partners (Barry et al., 2008; Simmons et al., 2005; Verhofstadt et al., 2005). These essential skills refers to a number of specific communication skills: Firstly, the use of the “I” pronoun was seen to have a particularly beneficial effect, since the partners who utilised this pronoun reported higher levels of marital satisfaction (Simmons et al., 2005).

Secondly, providing validation (agreeing, approving, accepting responsibility and complying); facilitation (assent, positive mind reading, and positive touch); emotional support (expressing care, reassuring, consolidation and understanding) and instrumental support (suggesting a specific plan, offering assistance, and constructive feedback) were all reported to contribute to marital satisfaction. Utilising these classes of behaviours in both support and conflict interactions were found to increase the recipient’s level of marital satisfaction (Verhofstadt et al., 2005). As indicated, validation can also be utilised in conflict situations; therefore, this can also fall under the theme of effective conflict interaction.

Thirdly, interactional skills as well as communication and conflict management (as indicated at the time when partners got married) predicted early marital satisfaction (Barry et al., 2008).

Communication skills in relation to affect

Two studies referred to the importance of focusing on both skill and affect in the communication process in order to improve marital satisfaction (Lavner & Bradbury, 2010; Bradbury et al., 2005). In this sense, what married couples said could be said to refer to skill while how they said it to affect (Bradbury et al., 2005). Affect codes refer to the codes assigned when married couples displayed certain pleasant (also referred to in the study as

“positive”) and destructive (also referred to as “negative”) affects such as anger, sadness, humour and interest. Skills codes, on the other hand, refer to specific effective (also referred to in the study as “positive”) and destructive (referred to in the study as “negative”) skills which married couples employed during problem-solving interactions, such as clarification, agreement, devaluations, and disagreement to name but a few (Bradbury et al., 2005).

It was found that both “positive” and “negative” affect codes and “positive” and “negative” skill codes were able to predict rates and levels of change in marital satisfaction (Bradbury et al., 2005). “Positive” skills and affects are seen to eradicate the “otherwise detrimental effects observed when high levels of negative skills and low levels of positive skills are delivered with little positive affect” (Bradbury et al., 2005, p. 25). These “positive” skills and affect include the expression of affection, interest/enthusiasm and humour (Bradbury et al., 2005). This study provides support for interventions which are aimed at strengthening marriages through modifying the interactional patterns and identifying “positive” skills and affect in order to bring about change in marital satisfaction (Bradbury et al., 2005). The application of these interventions facilitate the recognition and use of pro-social processes, while also controlling for “negative” skills and affect (Lavner & Bradbury, 2010).

Gender

Two studies directly referred to the gender differences in marital satisfaction (Barry et al., 2008; Ross, 2010). A different pattern emerged for men and women when predicting the degree of change in marital satisfaction. For husbands it was seen that sex, decision-making, control and communication/conflict management tended to predict changes in marital satisfaction. Of these, the quality of the sexual relationship was seen to have the strongest predictive factor for men (Barry et al., 2008). For wives, the greatest predictor of marital satisfaction was conflict management and communication management (Barry et al., 2008).

Wives reported further that respect, joy to be together, the ability to talk about “deep” rooted issues/concerns, friendship and acceptance were the most important to them. Husbands further reported that the ability to know one another, the total family experience, communication, displaying “deep” love, affection, sharing fun, laughter, common philosophies about finances & children and encouragement to become what both were “meant to be” were the most important factors to promote higher levels of marital satisfaction for them (Ross, 2010).

Socio-economic factors

Two studies focussed specifically on how financial positions may affect marital satisfaction (James, 2015; Zarch et al., 2014). James (2015) made a distinction between financially privileged and less privileged married couples, while Zarch et al. (2014) examined marital satisfaction for couples living in so called “under-rich”, “semi-rich” & “rich” regions and their relation to emotion regulation. For married couples living in “under-rich” areas, the intrapersonal components of emotional intelligence such as self-regard, assertiveness, independence, emotional awareness and self-actualisation together with stress management (which refers to stress tolerance and impulse control) were found to have the biggest predictive power on marital satisfaction (Zarch et al., 2014).

Married couples living in the “under-rich” areas were able to spend more time together which provided the opportunity to talk to each other and, consequently, achieve high levels of assertiveness and stress management (Zarch et al., 2014). In “semi-rich” regions it was found that marital satisfaction was best predicted by general mood, adaptability and interpersonal components. These interpersonal components of emotional intelligence include empathy, interpersonal relationships and social responsibility (Zarch et al., 2014).

In “rich” regions, it was found that general mood as a component of emotional intelligence had the most predictive ability on marital satisfaction. The researchers

particularly observed how marital satisfaction was consistently influenced by effective communication, attention, a optimistic attitude, happiness, intimacy, commitment and jointly shared recreational activities (Zarch et al., 2014). Finally, James (2015) found that married couples who were financially more privileged tended to experience higher marital satisfaction than less privileged married couples. This highlights the undeniable impact of financial status in relation to levels of marital satisfaction.

Discussion

It is clear from the review that effective communication in relationships plays a crucial role in promoting high levels of marital satisfaction. In addition to effective communication, other factors such as the quality of time spent together, high income levels, optimal problem solving and conflict management skills also promote high levels of marital satisfaction as discussed in the following sections.

The importance of communication activities such as talking, spending time together and supporting one another was found from the results to promote high levels of marital satisfaction. One explanation for this may be married couples' cognitive appraisals of the time spent together. Married couples may view time spent together and the engagement in joint activities as an investment that a partner is making in the marriage and this investment is then likely be seen as a form of confirmation which will result in an experience of higher levels of marital satisfaction (Johnson & Anderson, 2013).

The aforementioned findings further link with the findings on basic optimal exchanges and its relationship to marital satisfaction. This may be understood when taking into account the so called positive sentiment override. Weiss (1980) originally coined the term which refers to a theory which states that if couples have an overall content and salient relationship, they may be inclined to overlook detrimental elements when confronted with a

conflict interaction. In such instances the advantages of remaining in the relationship outweighs the disadvantages so to speak.

The importance of constructive or so called “positive” interactions during conflict situations was also identified in the current study. Displaying “positive” interactions in conflict situations were found to be related to high levels of marital satisfaction. Doing so may result in married couples attributing greater “positive” affect to their relationship (Yoshimura, 2013). Similar to the positive sentiment override, this strongly links to the ‘balance theory’, which proposes that couples can enjoy happy and satisfying marriages permitted that their effective/“positive” to negative/“negative” exchange ratio of communication is 5:1 during conflict situations. It is therefore when “negative” communication outweighs “positive” communication that marriages tend to become unsteady resulting in lower levels of marital satisfaction being experienced by one or both partners (Gottman, 1993, as cited in Doohan, 2013). It was also found that the expression of empathy to be associated with “positive” problem solving in conflict situations, as empathic partners are better able to understand the viewpoint of their partners and consequently to address the conflict in a pro-social manner (Perrone-McGovern et al., 2014).

It was also found that communication skill and affect are significantly related to levels of marital satisfaction. Communication skill according to Bradbury et al. (2005, p.26) refers to ‘what married couples say’ while affect refers to ‘how they say it’. It was found that effective communication skills could result in partners experiencing more pleasant emotions such as affection and love (Tavakolizadeh, Nejatian & Soori, 2015). It was also seen that individuals who experienced painful affectivity are more likely to display dysfunctional communication (Hanzel & Segrin, 2009). This led the researchers to conclude that communication skills & affect to have a two-way influence on each other, a view which is also underscored by the interactional approach towards psychology which states that the

degree of an individual's mental health is directly related to the quality of their interpersonal relationships (Vorster, 2011).

The researchers further concluded that empathy may play a crucial role in explaining this. The well-known psychotherapist, Carl Rogers (1957), theorised that when a therapist provided a client with high levels of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard such a client would be able to experience growth and self-actualisation. It appears, however, that the aforementioned was not only limited to the therapeutic relationship, as Vorster (2011) stated that when high levels of accurate empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard were present in any relationship (e.g. a marital relationship) it was likely that the parties involved would benefit from it as these variables contributed to psychological well-being. A further confirmation of the aforementioned recently found that the lack of empathy has been linked to greater levels of physical and psychological aggression in marital relationships (Cohen, Schulz, Liu, Halassa & Waldinger, 2015).

Regarding gender it was further found that different patterns of marital satisfaction exist for both husbands and wives. Various other studies indirectly reported different findings for men and women. One possible suggestion for these differences may be ascribed to gender-type attributes and socialisation like femininity and masculinity and that each gender type is likely to lead to different patterns of marital satisfaction (Gaunt, 2006). One study for example found that South African women reported greater life satisfaction than South African men, however both men and women experienced greater life satisfaction when compared to individuals with different marital statuses (Botha & Booysen, 2013).

The final theme which emerged from the current study was that of the impact of socio-economic status on marital satisfaction. Demographic and socio-economic circumstances, in particular financial status, were found to fundamentally influence marital outcome and levels of marital satisfaction (James, 2015). The differences in these findings

may be attributed to the complexities of modern day marital satisfaction patterns (James, 2015).

Limitations

No research in the social sciences lacks limitations and the present study was no exception. Firstly, only a limited number of databases could be searched and if more databases were searched, results may have varied. Two researchers nevertheless independently searched the databases included in the study in an attempt to have improved the validity. Secondly, mixed-methods studies and other reviews were excluded, as well as articles in languages other than English and Afrikaans. These exclusion criteria were mainly implemented due to time and financial constraints, as well as the fact that the researchers were only able to understand English and Afrikaans. Furthermore, a “rapid review” has certain limitations in itself, as it is more rapid than other reviews such as systematic reviews or meta-analyses which may also exclude important data as a result. Despite this, the core principles of a systematic review were nevertheless still adhered to throughout this rapid review in an attempt to have ensured the scientific rigour of the study (Schünemann & Moja, 2015).

Conclusion

The aim of the current study was to find and summarise the best available research on aspects of communication which influence high levels of marital satisfaction. The results of this rapid review support theories and existing literature which postulates that communication plays an integral role in married couples’ levels of marital satisfaction. The current results highlighted the important role of communication activities, constructive interactions during conflict situation, communication skills & affect, gender and socio-economic factors on promoting high levels of marital satisfaction. Based on these findings, recommendations for future research and marital therapy practitioners will be discussed next.

Recommendations

The results of this study may have implications for future research on aspects of communication which relate to high levels of marital satisfaction as well as for psychologists and other professionals involved in marital therapy. The current study emphasised the importance of how married couples communicate with one another, rather than what they say during their interactions. Practitioners should also keep in mind the importance of time spent together and pleasant affects displayed in general interactions as well as during conflict situations. Although more research is needed on the topics of gender and socio-economic factors and their relationship to marital satisfaction, marital therapy practitioners should also take cognisance that both of these constructs were also found to influence married couples' levels of satisfaction in the marriage. South African research on the current topic was also found to be lacking, as no South African studies could be identified and only studies from primarily the United States were included. This limits generalisability of the findings which may be due to the fact that South African researchers often lack the same amount of resources commonly found in developed countries such as the United States as many of the studies included in the current review for example offered monetary compensation to participants. The lack of South African research emphasizes the great need for more research on the current topic in the South African context.

A possible solution to the aforementioned challenge may be the pooling of resources and expertise between different tertiary institutions in South Africa to conduct rigorous research on this topic. Despite this limitation the available literature that was reviewed nevertheless highlighted that communication plays a significant and intricate role in relation to marital satisfaction, both in a direct and indirect manner. This information may be used by professionals when treating married couples who wish to improve their levels of marital satisfaction by means of placing more emphasis on improving their communication during

treatment. The current study's principal focus was on the marital relationship as a form of romantic relationships, however as discussed, romantic relationships are not only confined to marriage as it also includes cohabitating heterosexual relationships, same sex relationships and same sex marriages, as well as polyamory. Similar studies are also required on the similarities and differences on how alternative relationships relate to the marital relationship in order to better comprehend the dynamics of romantic relationships alternative to the marital relationship, especially in the South African context.

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SECTION III

Critical reflection

Introduction

Both the romantic relationship and communication are two constructs which are innately part of human existence, as is indicated in the brief literature orientation and introduction of the article in the present study. It is because they are so closely related to human behaviour and continue to remain relevant today that this topic initially interested the researcher and subsequently led to the completion of the present study. Within both of these constructs lie many different elements and each may present in many forms and variations. The *marital relationship* was however specifically chosen for the purposes of this study as there appeared to have been a change in recent times regarding the establishment of this form of relationship among numerous individuals. The implications of this shift were considered to potentially be able to influence a multitude of other aspects in society. Although the marital relationship is not considered to be superior to other types of romantic relationships it traditionally appeared to have been the most common type of romantic relationship which further influenced its selection to be focussed on in the present study. Communication in itself is also an intricate construct, which theorists and researchers are continuously exploring and uncovering.

Critical reflection of the present study

The current study aimed to summarize the findings of which aspects of communication contribute to high levels of marital satisfaction, by means of conducting a rapid systematic review. Given time constraints and in order to provide sufficient evidence of proficiency in research at Master's degree level, a rapid review was considered to be sufficient to achieve the aforementioned aim. The findings of this summary revealed that

there are many aspects of communication which contribute to high levels of marital satisfaction.

The various aspects of communication which emerged included communication activities, communication skill and the accompanying affect as well as communication elements which varied among gender and socioeconomic status. The wide range of these aspects supports the multifaceted nature of communication. Based on this it is clear that the aim of this study was achieved by means of this rapid review.

Recommendations for further research

It was further noted while completing the present study that the included literature mostly emanated from the United States. These studies were in most instances able to report on various forms of data related to the relationship between communication and high marital satisfaction such as physiological changes, observable marital behaviour and self-reported experiences. No studies of this nature could be identified from a South African, or even a larger African context. This does not imply that none of these studies had ever been done, it was simply not identified as part of this rapid review. As it was a rapid review, this in itself may have been a limitation that resulted in some studies having been omitted in this review, however the general principles utilised in a systematic review were still applied during this rapid review and as such it is doubtful whether any significant research on this topic was omitted in fact omitted in this rapid review.

This led the researcher to come to the conclusion that the apparent lack of in depth and comprehensive studies described above in a South African context might be a consequence of the amount of resources which tertiary institutions in the United States appear have at their disposal to conduct such research, therefore equipping them to produce more rigorous research on the topic based on higher quality of data. If this is the case a

recommendation to produce such studies in South Africa in the future would require creative problem solving and planning by South African researchers, such as more co-operation and the pooling of resources and expertise between various South African institutions. This would enable researchers from various South African institutions to work together on combined, large research projects on the present topic. This in turn would hopefully enable more rigorous and in depth research on this topic in a South African context which appears to be becoming gradually more important when considering escalating divorce rates in South Africa.

Conclusion

The summary of these results indicated that communication activities, enacted communication, positive exchanges, positive conflict interaction, communication skill, affect and skills, gender and socioeconomic factors contribute to high levels of marital satisfaction. These findings hold implications for future research as more research is needed within a South African context. Furthermore, it may hold value for those professionals who conduct marital and couple's counselling / psychotherapy to possibly place a greater focus on the value of positive interactions between couples during their interventions.

Appendix A

Kappa K Ratings

Authors	Observed agreement (P_o)	Expected Agreement (P_e)	Kappa K	Included/ Excluded
1. James, 2015	0.87	0.52	0.73	Included
2. Gains, Clark, Afful&Dainton, 2015	0.93	0.65	0.8	Included
3. Bloch, Haase&Levenson, 2014	0.93	0	0.93	Included
4. Zarch, Marashi&Raji, 2014	0.93	0.52	0.85	Included
5. Allendorf&Ghimire, 2013	0.75	0.7	0.2	Excluded
6. Yoshimura, 2013	0.92	0.54	0.83	Included
7. Harris et al., 2012	0.67	0.5	0.34	Excluded
8. Lavner& Bradbury, 2010	0.92	0.68	0.75	Included
9. Hanzel&Segrin, 2009	0.92	0.66	0.77	Included
10. Barry et al., 2008	1	0.74	1	Included
11. Thompson-Hayes& Webb, 2008	0.93	0.72	0.75	Included
12. Cornelius &Alessi, 2007	0.88	0.52	0.75	Included
13. Rogge et al., 2006	0.82	0.59	0.56	Excluded
14. Bradbury et al., 2005	0.9	0.68	0.7	Included
15. Verhofstadt, Buysse, Ickes, De Clerq&Peene, 2005	0.92	0.66	0.76	Included
16. Weger, 2005	0.9	0.68	0.7	Included
17. Ross, 2010	0.92	0.72	0.7	Included
18. Simmons, 2005	0.92	0.66	0.77	Included

Appendix B**List of tables, figure and abbreviations**

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Abbreviations

- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)