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How Does Education Level Affect Marital Processes?

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School of Family Life: Brigham Young University



FLOURISHING FAMILIES PROJECT
Survey of Family Life

Introduction

Current research utilizes SES levels as a predictor of marital interactions. However, since higher education attainment levels usually lead to higher SES levels, it is presumed that education can also be used as a predictor of marital interactions. Research has found that women's education levels are positively correlated with marital stability and that husbands' education levels are not significantly correlated with marital stability. The current study will further determine whether education level can be used as a predictor of marital processes, as measured by wives' perceptions of various marital interactions. We hypothesize that husbands' and wives' education attainment levels will be predictors of various marital processes.

Methods

The sample for this study was 500 families from the Flourishing Families Project. The data were collected in Seattle during 2007. Families identified using the Polk Directory were randomly selected from targeted census tracts that mirrored the socio-economic and racial stratification of reports of local school districts. Of the 692 eligible families contacted, 423 agreed to participate, resulting in a 61% response rate. The average age of the mothers was 43.4, while the average age of the fathers was 45.3. Also, 72% of mothers and 69% of fathers had a bachelor's degree or higher. These participants responded to detailed questionnaires and video tasks measuring various constructs within the family. The video tapes are coded by trained observers for more than 60 different behavioral codes such as anxiety, dominance, and warmth. For this study, we observed how education level influenced the variables of power outcome, love withdrawal, social sabotage, child care, household chores, criticism and forgiveness. Education level was divided into low (some college or less) and high (associate's degree or greater) levels.

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Comparison of Means of Wives' Perception of Marital Processes by Level of Education

	Husband's Education		Wife's Education	
	Low	High	Low	High
Power Outcome	13.08*	11.75	12.62	11.91
Love Withdrawal	15.35**	12.82	14.17	13.24
Social Sabotage	9.93**	7.92	8.80	8.34
Child Care	3.49	3.55	3.47	3.55
Household Chores	3.76	3.66	3.70	3.69
Criticism	7.02*	5.58	6.70*	6.28
Forgiveness	5.49	5.57	5.57	5.54

Notes: * p < .05 between adjacent columns
** p < .01 between adjacent columns

Scales Used to Measure Marital Processes

Power Outcome	6 item scale assessing perception of who the final decision-maker is in the marital relationship
Love Withdrawal	5 item scale assessing perception of spouse using love withdrawal as a covert form of aggression
Social Sabotage	6 item scale assessing perception that spouse uses social sabotage as a covert form of aggression
Child Care Division of Labor	10 item scale assessing perception that spouse participates in child care, such as helping with homework, driving child to sports practices and music lessons, etc
Household Division of Labor	7 item scale assessing perception that spouse participates in household chores, such as preparing meals and washing dishes
Gottman Criticism	3 item scale assessing perception that spouse is critical during conflictual discussions
Forgiveness	3 item scale assessing a person's ability to forgive and move on when hurt by their spouse

Results

In an independent samples *t*-test of husbands' education levels, there was a significant difference in the scores for criticism, power outcome, love withdrawal, and social sabotage. In an independent samples *t*-test of wives' education levels, there was a significant difference in the score for criticism. The results supported the hypothesis, displaying that education attainment levels are good predictors of wives' perceptions of marital processes.

Implications

Previous research has found that women's education levels are significant predictors of marital interactions. However, the current study found that the husbands' education level is a good predictor of many marital processes. And in contrast to the predicting ability that husbands' education level had, the current study found women's education levels to be significant in only one area of marital interaction: criticism. This criticism of the wives could be explained by the fact that economic earning potential is closely related to education level and so a husband who has less education may be seen as being more incompetent and less able to fulfill his role within the marriage. Therefore, we infer that higher education levels obtained by husbands have positive effects upon marital processes as perceived by wives.

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