A Study of Nonverbal Communication Decoding and its Relation to Marital Satisfaction

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A Study of Nonverbal Communication Decoding and its Relation to Marital Satisfaction

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Improving communication within the family can lead to more satisfying marriage and family relationships. Communication includes interaction through words, tone of voice, and our focus in the study, body language. Body language is a key form of communication, because of its honest demonstration of feelings, and it therefore has the potential to influence a couple’s relationship. Although this link has not been explicitly studied, previous literature suggests that the ability to understand body language and how satisfied an individual is in marriage are related. First, we examined if this relationship exists. Then, we studied some factors that can be used to explain the relationship between body language and an individual’s marital satisfaction. We reasoned, if a person is not particularly empathetic, then understanding those messages through body language may be of little benefit to the marriage. Likewise, an individual who feels more satisfied sexually may be more aware of the body language their partner is using. Finally, we believe if a person doesn’t have self-confidence, or is not confident about their importance in the relationship, then their effort in the relationship will be sub-par.

Body language is one way through which people express their feelings and, if misinterpreted or ignored, can cause frustration and discord in a marriage. Studying this relationship between body language and marital satisfaction, and the factors that influence this relationship, can lead to a better understanding of how family systems structure because of these non-verbal cues and their interpretation. This understanding will help therapists understand how to help family systems restructure. Thus, we have the following hypotheses that self-worth, sexual satisfaction, and empathy separately influence the relationship between understanding body language and marital satisfaction.

We used several survey-based measures to gather data from 1000 participants through Amazon’s MTurk. Though we are still in the process of collecting data. Preliminary findings were drawn from 201 participants. Amazon MTurk is a website that has thousands of workers that perform small jobs for compensation. In this case, we compensated workers for completing our survey posted on qualtrics.com. We measured knowledge of body language through the Test of Nonverbal Cue Knowledge (TONCK) (Rosip & Hall, 2004), and marital satisfaction was measured through several measures including marital interaction, marital abuse, divorce-prone, marital problems, and marital disagreements. (Amato, P.R., 2007) Sexual satisfaction, self-worth and empathy were self-reported using the Sexual Satisfaction Scale, (Rust, J., 1986) the Self-Perception Profile for Adults, (Messer & Harter, 2012) and the Interpersonal Reactivity Index Global Measure (Davis, 1980) respectively. Additionally, we had participants report several demographics including marital status, age, race, education, and income. We screened workers on MTurk with an initial screening-demographics survey to find participants that were currently married. We then qualified married participants to complete the full survey. Not all participants that responded as married for the screening survey completed the full survey.

As we are still collecting data, we have collected results from 201 participants. Based on these preliminary results, we do not have enough information to reject our initial hypothesis that understanding body language and marital satisfaction. In other words, we found no significant relationship between understanding body language and marital satisfaction. Additionally, self-worth did not change this relationship at all. However, sexual satisfaction, and empathy significantly influenced two aspects of marital satisfaction. When sexual satisfaction was considered, understanding body language and marital satisfaction...
abuse were significantly related, in such a way that suggests that if a couple reports low sexual satisfaction in their marriage, those that understand body language better tend experience marital abuse less frequently. (p<.05) Additionally, those that report low empathy tend to have better marital interaction as they understand body language better. (p<.01)

The effect sexual satisfaction has on the relationship between marital abuse and body language makes sense when considering marital abuse. The most common type of marital abuse is where both partners abuse each other due to conflict. If one spouse understands the other spouse’s body language better, then they can more easily avoid provoking the other spouse. In a similar manner, those who have trouble understanding another’s emotions, and connecting with them that way, would show increased marital interaction if they understand what their spouse’s body language says about the spouse’s emotions.

It is possible that the second finding suggests that for those who are naturally less empathetic, meaningful connections in the context of relationships can be worked at through studying body language. Further research could examine marriages without body language training compared to marriages with body language training to examine the effect increasing body language has on marital interaction. Other studies could focus on the individual looking to see if body language training improves a person’s self-reported empathetic feelings, in essence, seeing if empathy can be learned rather than being innate.

In conclusion preliminary findings provide no evidence supporting a relationship between understanding body language marital satisfaction. However, we conclude that sexual satisfaction and empathy are considered, marital satisfaction is significantly related with understanding body languages. When sexual satisfaction is low, understanding body language is associated with lower marital abuse frequency, and when empathy is low in a person, understanding body language is associated with increased marital interaction. Self-worth does not have a significant effect on this relationship, as well as no other relationships considered were found to be significant.

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