

The Effects of Locus of Control and Differentiation of Self on Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that internal locus of control and a high degree of differentiation of self are more beneficial to a person's overall well-being. Using a sample of clients at a university based couple and family therapy clinic, we hoped to show evidence that an internal locus of control and high degree of differentiation of self are associated with higher relationship satisfaction. After analyzing results from questionnaires, we found that for men, there was a direct relationship between locus of control and differentiation of self, as well as differentiation of self and men's and women's relationship satisfaction.

Introduction

Locus of control and self-differentiation are two personal characteristics that may be correlated with marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction is a subjective measure based on whether an individual's needs, expectations, and desires are being met in a marriage (Bahr, Chappell, & Leigh, 2008). Unsatisfying marriages have been linked to depression and anxiety (Fincham & Bradbury, 1993; Peleg, 2008), while satisfying marriages are linked to positive mental health (Rogers, Young, Cohen, Dworen, & Lipetz, 1970). Age and gender are two factors that are associated with happiness in a marriage (Bahr, Chappell, & Leigh, 2008; Schumm, Ballman, & Jurich, 1997), as well as lifestyle choices, such as roles, religion, occupation, and child rearing (Helms, Walls, Crouter, & McHale, 2010; Ahmadi & Hossein-abadi, 2009; Hughes, 1992). Individual traits can also affect marital satisfaction. The present study investigates the relationships among locus of control, differentiation of self, and marital satisfaction.

Locus of control (LOC) describes where people place the cause of their actions. Those who believe that outcomes are results of their own actions have an internal locus of control,

while people with an external locus of control attribute outcomes to the environment, luck, or fate. Therefore, those with an internal LOC will view rewards as reinforcements of their own actions, thoughts, or behavior (Rotter, 1966).

According to the literature, an internal locus of control is generally more beneficial than an external one in that the former is correlated with better emotional health and well-being. People with higher self-esteem are more often internally oriented (Fish & Karabenick, 1971). Also, Landau (2000) examined the relationship between locus of control and socioeconomic status and their effects on depression and life satisfaction in a sample of Israeli widows. She found that life satisfaction was higher and depression levels were lower in widows with an internal locus of control, regardless of socioeconomic status. This is because those with an internal LOC have the skills to reorganize their lives, engage in more achievement oriented behaviors, and are less compliant and conforming. Similarly, Deneve and Cooper (1998) found in a meta-analysis of 137 personality traits, including locus of control, that accrediting control to an external source (i.e., having an external locus of control) can be damaging to subjective well-being.

In addition to the effect that locus of control has on psychological well-being, it can also affect lifestyle choices and physical health. In an analysis of 123 respondents where some were smokers, some nonsmokers, and some former smokers, the former smokers were more internally oriented than the smokers (Molloy, Wolstencroft, King, Lowe, & Gardener, 1997). This showed the advantages of being internally oriented for making significant life changes. In another study, 123 joggers and 93 non-exercisers were given a questionnaire using the Multidimensional Health Locus of Control Scale. Joggers' scores were significantly higher on the

internal subscale than non-exercisers (Slenker, Price, & O'Connell, 1985). These and other studies show that people with an internal locus of control are more likely to take steps to actively improve their health.

In conjunction with the effects of locus of control on emotional and physical health, three previous studies have shown a link between LOC and marital satisfaction. In a sample of 44 couples, Mlott and Lira (1977) concluded that there were no differences in locus of control between stable and unstable marriages, but only differences between partners in unstable marriages. Doherty (1981) found similar results from the analysis of a questionnaire distributed to 86 couples. Camp and Ganong (1997), however, found that couples in satisfying marriages had a more internal locus of control compared with those in dissatisfying marriages. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is the scale used to measure LOC. Mlott and Lira and Doherty used Rotter's Locus of Control Scale, while Camp and Ganong used the Miller Marital Locus of Control Scale. Additionally, there were differences in samples. The first two listed studies used samples of couples in their twenties, while the latter used middle-aged couples. Lastly, the first two conducted their studies within four years of each other, while the latter work was done over a decade later. Changes in societal norms and pressures may have altered views and expectations in marriages, the mental processes of the average person, or the level of truth when being questioned.

The present study used a clinical sample of couples seeking couple therapy at a university's on-campus training clinic in order to explain the effects of locus of control on marital satisfaction while also taking into account differentiation of self. Differentiation of self is the ability to distinguish between emotion and thought (Bowen, 1978). People who are

highly differentiated tend to be less emotionally reactive because they are able to think through their response rather than simply react to emotion evoking situations (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). This means that they are able to recognize when thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are emotional or intellectual and have control over what will affect their behavior. This allows them to maintain individuality while still staying in connection in relationships (Bartle & Sabatelli, 1995).

Like locus of control, self differentiation has also been shown to be linked to emotional health and positive well-being. Skowron, Stanley, and Shapiro (2009) found that in a sample of young adult college students, higher self-differentiation was correlated with fewer psychological symptoms and interpersonal problems. This also means that people who are more emotionally reactive and unable to regulate emotions have a less clear sense of self in relationships. Similarly, in a sample of 95 married men, higher levels of psychological well-being were observed in those with high levels of self-differentiation (Bohlander, 1999). Depression levels are also negatively correlated with differentiation of self (Elieson & Rubin, 2001). Non-depressed people are shown to have higher levels of differentiation of self than clinically depressed people. In conclusion, self-differentiated people are more likely to be happy and have better emotional health.

Bartle (1993) found that men with lower levels of emotional reactivity were better able to trust in relationships. Bartle-Haring, Rosen & Stith (2002) showed that higher levels of differentiation of self were associated with decreased stressors and increased psychological well being. Rosen, Bartle-Haring, & Stith (2001) demonstrated that differentiation of self in the

family of origin and in the current relationship also decreased the probability of violence in the current relationship.

Previous studies have also examined the relationship between differentiation of self and marital satisfaction. From questionnaires completed by a sample of 39 middle-aged couples, Skowron (2000) found that highly differentiated couples were more satisfied with their marriages. Similar findings were reported by Peleg (2008), in an investigation involving 121 Israeli men and women at various stages of married life. Another study found that highly differentiated individuals experienced greater marital satisfaction, while undifferentiated people had higher marital stress (Lim & Jennings, 1996). Overall, people who have higher levels of differentiation of self appear to experience greater marital satisfaction.

The present study also aims to show this same relation between differentiation of self and marital satisfaction. However, what is not known in the literature is the relationship between differentiation of self and locus of control and how each of these impact marital satisfaction. Additionally, Peleg (2008) did not include responses from both spouses. The present study includes a sample of couples instead of a sample of individuals, leading to greater understanding of how both locus of control and differentiation of self not only influence the “actors” relationship satisfaction, but also the partner’s. Finally, two of the three studies (Skowron, 2000; Lim & Jennings, 1996) were published over a decade ago, and with community samples.

Methods

Sample

The sample consisted of 176 couple clients at a university based clinic who consented to research along with their treatment. The average age was 30.4 years for females and 32.4 years for males. 50.4 percent were in their first marriage, 9.1 percent were remarried, and 21.8 percent were cohabitating. As far as ethnicity, 68.8 were Caucasian, 12.7 were African American, 4.7 percent were Hispanic, and 2.9 percent were Asian. The majority of the sample earned an annual combined income of less than 50,000 dollars per year.

Instruments

Relationship Satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was measured using a single-item scale asking the question, “How satisfied would you say you are with your relationship?” (1 = not at all, 10 = completely). Participants were also asked about their commitment level with the question, “How committed are you to your relationship?” (1 = not at all, 10 = completely committed).

Differentiation of Self Inventory. Differentiation of self was measured using the Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). It consists of 43 items and is measured using 6-point Likert-type scale. It includes four subscales: Emotional Reactivity (i.e. “People have remarked that I am overly emotional”), Emotional Cutoff (i.e. “I have difficulty expressing my feelings”), I-Position (i.e. “There is no point in getting upset about things I cannot change”), Fusion with Others (“I am likely to smooth over or settle conflict between people I care about”). However, the Fusion with Others subscale was dropped due to low internal reliabilities.

Locus of Control. Clients completed an abbreviated version of Rotter’s Locus of Control Scale (Rotter, 1966). This scale had 11 items. The participants chose the “a” or “b” of the item

based on how closely it fit with their beliefs. The score provided an assessment of an internal locus of control or an external locus of control. Internal consistency reliabilities were reported at .58 for the forced choice format (Barnett & Lanier, 1995). This reliability compared to the original Rotter scale. To score the LOC scale, we created an “internal” score; those statements that indicated an internal local of control were scored with a 1, and those that indicated an external local of control were scored with a 0. We then took the average of the 11 items so that scores ranged from 0 (completely external) to 1 (completely internal). We used the frequencies of the scores for the sample of men and of women in the couples to create three groups. The “low” internal group had scores ranging from 0-.55, the middle group had scores ranging from .56 to .73; and the high internal group had scores ranging from .74 to 1. As part of the analysis we categorized couples by their internal locus of control groups.

Results

Table 1 presents the number of men and women that scored in each of the groups on the locus of control scale. Group 1 represents approximately one third of the sample that had the lowest internal locus of control score (0-.55). Group 2 scored between .56 and .73, and Group 3 scored between .74 and 1. The third row shows the number of couples with husbands and wives in the same group. This means that both partners in the couple have a similar level of internal locus of control.

Table 1: Internal Locus of Control

	Number of Participants in Group 1	Number of Participants in Group 2	Number of Participants in Group 3

	(scored 0-.55)	(scored .56-.73)	(scored .74-1)
Men	61	55	60
Women	62	54	60
Number of husbands and wives who were both in that group	28	18	17

Table 2 displays the comparison between internal locus of control groups and mean scores on differentiation of self. The columns show the scores of Group 1, Group 2, and Group 3 using the three different subscales of differentiation for men and women. For the Males, there were significant differences in the means among the groups based on a One Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). For the I-position subscale ($F(2,182)=6.83$ $p<.01$) the high internal group had a significantly different mean than the other two groups in a post hoc comparison procedure (Scheffe). For the cut-off subscale ($F(2, 182)=5.66$; $p < .01$), the high internal group’s mean was significantly different than the low internal group mean. For the emotional reactivity subscale ($F(2,182)=5.62$; $p<.01$), again the high internal group had a significantly different mean score than the low internal group. In the same test procedures for women, only the women’s scores on I-position showed a trend in differences among the locus of control groups ($F(2,173)=2.99$, $p=.053$).

Table 2: Comparison of Internal Locus of Control and Differentiation of Self

		Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Men	Internal LOC	0-.55	.56-.73	.74-1

	I-Position	3.97	4.1	4.50
	Cut-off	4.24	4.40	4.67
	Emotional Reactivity	3.37	3.53	3.90
Women	Internal LOC	0-.55	.56-.73	.74-1
	I-Position	3.57	3.92	3.88
	Cut-off	4.27	4.57	4.38
	Emotional Reactivity	2.71	2.97	3.01

Table 3 shows the comparison between internal locus of control and marital satisfaction between men and women with couple as the unit of analysis. The first and second columns indicate which locus of control group the male and female of the couples were in. The third and fourth columns show the level of relationship satisfaction of women and men in each LOC pairing. The last column shows the number of participants in a relationship with that pairing. In a 3 (female locus of control group) by 3 (male locus of control group) MANOVA (multivariate analysis of variance) with male and female relationship satisfaction and male and female scores on the DSI subscales as dependent variables the overall F for male’s internal group showed a trend toward significance ($p=.064$). In the between subjects tests, there were no significant differences in relationship satisfaction among the groups. There was one significant two-way interaction for males cut-off ($F(4)=2.63$; $p < .05$).

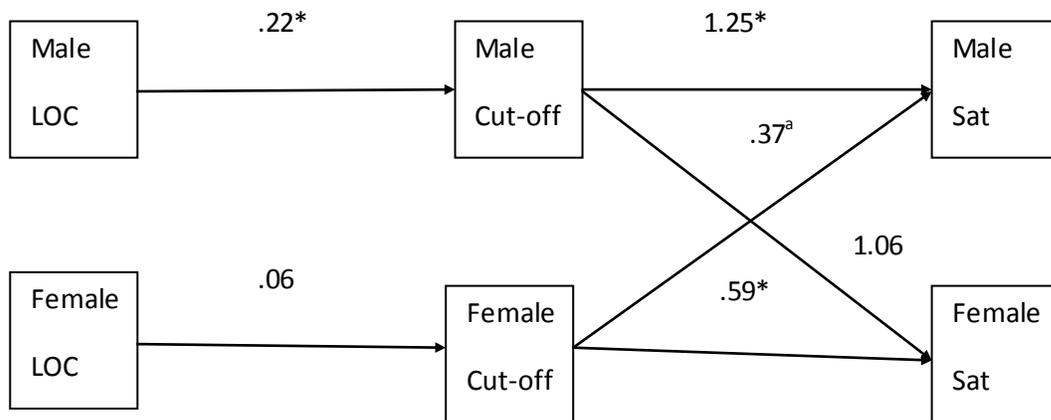
Table 3: Relationship Satisfaction and internal locus of control (LOC)

Women’s Internal LOC Group	Partner’s Internal LOC Group (Men)	Women’s Relationship Satisfaction	Partner’s Relationship Satisfaction (Men)	Number of Participants with this Pairing
Group 1	Group 1	5.40	6.24	25
	Group 2	4.78	5.39	18
	Group 3	4.77	5.69	13
Group 2	Group 1	3.94	4.80	16
	Group 2	5.24	6.17	17
	Group 3	5.44	7.13	16

Group 3	Group 1	5.07	6.50	14
	Group 2	4.06	5.63	16
	Group 3	5.60	6.71	24

In order to understand the relationships among all the variables, we estimated a path model to determine how internal locus of control was related to differentiation of self which in turn was related to relationship satisfaction. Because of the results of the One Way ANOVA we knew that cut-off was different for the locus of control groups at least for males. Previous literature using the DSI showed that cut-off had the strongest relationship with relationship satisfaction (Knerr, et al., 2010). We therefore elected to use only cut-off as our indicator of differentiation of self. This path model can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1



*; p<.05 a; p=.06

The χ^2 for the model was estimated at 4.96 with 7 degrees of freedom and was nonsignificant. This suggests a good fit to the data. The other fit indices suggested the same

(NFI=.96; IFI=1.0, CFI=1.0; RMSEA=.00). The model predicted 13.6% of the variance in females' relationship satisfaction and 14.5% of males' relationship satisfaction. The path from male's LOC to his cut-off was significant. The paths from male's cut-off to both his and his partner's satisfaction were also significant. Females' LOC did not predict her cut-off, but her cut-off predicted her satisfaction, and there was a trend toward predicting his satisfaction ($p=.06$).

Discussion

Results showed that LOC is related to differentiation of self in the form of cut-off in males but not females. Also, the male's level of cut-off is directly related to male's and female's relationship satisfaction. Female's LOC does affect cut-off, which affects male's and female's relationship satisfaction, although these relationships are not significant. No direct relationship was found between LOC and marital satisfaction.

Reasons for these findings are open to interpretation. It is likely, however, that because people with internal LOC believe they have control over what happens to them, they are more likely to see problems in a relationship as a result of their own actions. This leads them to be less emotionally cut off because they take action to fix problems. This can be through discussion of issues or general communication with partners. This leads to more issues being resolved, and therefore, higher satisfaction levels.

These findings match the overall conclusion in previous literature that internal LOC is generally more beneficial to a person's well-being than external LOC. Previous literature has linked the relationship between internal LOC and lower levels of depression, higher levels of life satisfaction (Landau, 2000), better self-esteem (Fish & Karabenick, 1971), and subjective well-being (Deneve & Cooper, 1998). Internal LOC also leads people to make healthier choices such

as not smoking (Molloy et al., 1997) and exercising (Slenker, et al., 1985). The present study now adds to this list the benefits of an internal LOC in the satisfaction of a relationship.

Previous studies of LOC and relationship satisfaction show some similarities and some differences in results. Mlott and Lira (2006) and Doherty (1981) did not find an association between LOC and marital stability when the couple was used as the unit of measure. They did find that in unstable marriages, wives were more external than husbands. In other words, wives' internal LOC was associated with more stable marriages. The current study's findings were similar in that relationship satisfaction, similar to marital stability, was not associated with LOC when the couple was used as the unit of measure. The current study did find that female LOC was associated with better relationship satisfaction, but it was not significant. Camp and Ganong's results (1997) were much more similar to the present results. They found that couples with internal LOCs were more satisfied in their marriages. Our results showed the same, although they were only significant in males.

The findings of the present study also reinforce the idea that higher levels of differentiation of self are better for well-being. Previous research showed that self-differentiated people show fewer psychological symptoms and interpersonal problems (Skowron et al., 2008), better psychological well-being (Bohlander, 1999; Bartle-Haring et al., 2002), and lower levels of depression (Elieson & Rubin, 2001). Other previous research shows the benefits of differentiation of self and relationships, specifically emotional reactivity and trust (Bartle, 1993), and relationship violence (Rosen et al., 2001). The current research reinforces this by illustrating that differentiation of self (i.e. cut-off) is positively associated with relationship satisfaction.

Previous studies of differentiation of self and relationship satisfaction show some similarities and some differences in results. Along with the present study, Lim and Jennings (1996), Peleg (2008), and Skowron (2000) found that marital (relationship) satisfaction was associated with higher levels of differentiation of self. Skowron's results were also similar to ours in that they showed that male's levels of emotional cutoff were more significantly related marital satisfaction than female's. On the contrary, Peleg found emotional cutoff to be significantly related to marital satisfaction in both males and females.

There are some limitations to this study that may have altered results. First, the sample was taken from clients at a couple and family therapy clinic who agreed to participate in optional research. Therefore, the sample is not representative of all couples. Also, the LOC scale had low reliability.

In order to achieve more accurate results in the future, the sample should be taken from couples with a variety of satisfaction levels and not a clinical sample. This will provide more representative results. Also, changes should be made to the LOC scale to improve validity and reliability scores.

Conclusion

These findings that internal locus of control, mostly for men, affects emotional cutoff which then affects relationship satisfaction, are extremely important for those trying to improve their own or others' relationships. This information, along with past and future research, is necessary for therapists and couples to understand reasons for satisfaction levels, as well as what must change. An unhappy couple may see improvements in their satisfaction levels if they first work on their individual levels of internal LOC and differentiation of self.

Further research should be done without the limitations present in the current study in order to attain more accurate results. More information about how to change one's LOC placement and level of differentiation of self is also necessary in order for therapists and couples to see improvements in satisfaction levels.

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