

HASIL CEK_Artikel 1640

by Artikel 1640 Pgpaud

Submission date: 16-Dec-2022 12:35PM (UTC+0700)

Submission ID: 1982620529





File name: 1640-Article_Text-4099-3-10-20220802_1.pdf (295.37K)

Word count: 6722

Character count: 40109

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The Positive State and Positive Mindset in Building a Positive Relationship: A Review Paper

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KEYWORDS:

Resilience
Mindfulness
Relationship satisfaction
Romantic relationship

CITATION:

Zhooriyati Sehu Mohamad et al. (2022). The Positive State and Positive Mindset in Building a Positive Relationship: A Review Paper. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 7(7), e001640. <https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v7i7.1640>

ABSTRACT 8

Romantic relationships have become one of the strongest predictors of life satisfaction and well-being as couples provide social and emotional support to one another. However, the level of intimacy between couples might decline due to increasing commitment over the years of marriage. When the level of intimacy decreases, negative consequences might happen which includes separation, divorce, as well as physical or mental health problems. It is common for individuals to get involved in romantic relationships; therefore, individuals need to understand the components that facilitate a positive relationship to minimize negative consequences from happening. Besides, having good romantic relationships enables individuals to be more satisfied with their life and improve their well-being. This paper discusses about the different factors that contribute to relationship satisfaction such as socioeconomic status, breadwinner arrangement in family, attachment styles, communication skills, physical appearance, cultural differences, duration of marriage and presence of children in marriage. This paper also specifically analyse and discuss how a positive state and mindset can contribute to positive relationships.

Contribution/Originality: This study contributes to the existing literature on positive relationship. Although there are many past researches on this variable, this paper discusses in the positive psychology perspectives.

1. Introduction

Romantic relationships have different levels of intimacy compared to other types of social relationship. Romantic relationships have become one of the strongest predictors of life satisfaction and well-being (Schmaling & Sher, 2000; Wade & Pevalin, 2004) as spouses provide social and emotional support to one another, hence, helping each other to cope with stress (Umberson & Karas Montez, 2010). Aside from that, marriage or sharing a household can lead to economies of scale, as well as profiting from a larger friendship and kin network (Ross & Mirowsky, 2013). The establishment of marriage contributes to one's subjective well-being (Perelli-Harris et al., 2019) such as emotional satisfaction in women, joint economic stability, and improvement in health (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). It is reported that romantic relationships have the potential to provide lifelong companionship, romance, support, sexual fulfillment, and commitment needs (Vangelisti & Perlman, 2018). Romantic relationships can affect one's life positively as the relationship often gives significant impact on safety, affection, and happiness (Gómez-López et al., 2019).

Positive relationships form if partners have supportive communication exchanges and constructive problem-solving skills, which will result in lower levels of psychological distress (Papp et al., 2007). Besides, positive relationships are associated with lower allostatic load (Seeman et al., 2002) while relationship strains will impair individuals' physiological and psychological well-being (Graham et al., 2006; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001). Furthermore, couples who are resilient tend to handle their conflicts better (Bradley & Hojjat, 2017) as resiliency helps them cope with difficult life events (Bogar & Hulse-Killacky, 2006). Other than resilience, mindfulness helps couples achieve positive relationships as interpersonal connection and closeness in relationships can be improved with mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 1993). The absence of destructive conflicts among partners in romantic relationships does not cause a well-functioning relationship, as both constructive conflict behaviors and high levels of intimacy are important in defining a well-functioning relationship (Fruzzetti, 1996).

Despite having a positive relationship, it is hard for married couples to sustain romantic relationships as their level of intimacy might decline due to the increasing commitment over the years of marriage (Acker & Davis, 1992). When intimate relationships decline among married couples, the consequences of marital distress, separation, and divorce can be alarming as they are often associated with a lot of physical or mental health problems (Beach & Whisman, 2012; Robles, 2014). Hence, it is important to identify the factors that can contribute to relationship satisfaction. This paper aims to discuss the association of positive mindset and state in building a positive relationship.

2. Factors Contributing to Relationship Satisfaction

An individual's subjective well-being can be affected by the economic conditions of a society and marriage (Schyns, 1998). Couples who are not financially stable often have more conflicts and lower relationship satisfaction over time (Karney, 2020; Masarik et al., 2016). It is recorded that lower income couples have higher risk of divorce than higher income couples (Bramlett & Mosher, 2002) as it has tendency to cause them to have lower relationship satisfaction because their economic hardship may cause them stress, hence, increasing conflicts which may lead to divorces (White & Rogers, 2000). Due to economic hardship, couples might fight over their limited resources and struggle with disappointment when financial means are meager (Hardie & Lucas, 2010). In

extreme cases, it is found that financial strain is associated with couple violence (Benson, 2003; Fox et al., 2011). However, the economic factors will not affect the relationship satisfaction if couples understand the sources of their conflicts and stresses (Hardie & Lucas, 2010).

Besides, breadwinner arrangement in family contributes to relationship satisfaction. A breadwinner is defined as someone who contributes to the majority of household income or is the only contributor (Blom & Hewitt, 2020). Many studies found that when women earned more than their male partners, those couples experienced poorer relationship outcomes including lower levels of marital happiness (Bertrand et al., 2015; Wilcox & Nock, 2006; Zhang, 2015) and quality (Brennan et al., 2001). Several studies including Chinese female-breadwinner couples and American couples found that the finding is associated with individuals' values on traditional gender role (Coughlin & Wade, 2012; Furdyna et al., 2008; Zhang, 2015). Traditional ideals of masculinity and femininity are challenged when households divert from the usual male-breadwinner arrangement (Sherman, 2017). When the latter happens, this could reduce men's self-worth and women's consideration for their partners, thus, reducing relationship satisfaction (Sherman, 2017; Rao, 2017). In another study, results indicated that when men were the main provider or when both men and women contributed equally, and then transitioned to a female-breadwinner arrangement, they became less satisfied with their relationship (Blom & Hewitt, 2020). However, this was not the case when the transition was to a male-breadwinner arrangement. Additionally, women became less satisfied in their relationship when men became unemployed due to illness or disability but no differences in relationship satisfaction were found when women were unemployed due to the same reasons. This is because men are seen as the main provider.

Attachment is defined as the emotional bond between individuals (Bowlby, 1988). Avoidant attachment individuals feel uncomfortable with intimacy, hence, they distant themselves (Godbout et al., 2017). Both anxious and avoidant attachment individuals are less likely to depend on their partners for support (Collins, 1996; Egeci & Gençöz, 2006) while the latter is also less likely to provide support to their partners, engage in open communication and conflict resolution. When individuals are avoidant or anxious, they are more likely to blame their partners, use more verbal and physical aggression, and become demanding and withdrawn, hence, creating barriers for them in developing satisfying relationships. Anxious and avoidance attachment were associated with lower levels of current relationship quality, but the latter was also linked with lower relationship satisfaction over time (Saavedra et al., 2010). In contrast, individuals with secure attachment are comfortable with intimacy, willing to rely on others when they need help (Collins, 1996) and engage in open communication (Feeney, 1995). They felt closer to their partners (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and were more satisfied with their romantic relationships (Simpson, 1990).

In addition, communication skills were found to be significantly associated with relationship satisfaction even after controlling for other important factors that contribute to relationship satisfaction such as attachment styles and problem-solving skills (Egeci & Gençöz, 2006; Filsinger & Thoma, 1988; Gottman et al., 1998). When couples engage in increased level of negative communication, it impairs their ability to handle conflicts, thus, affecting their relationship satisfaction (Bradbury et al., 1998; Gottman, 1994; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001).

Physical appearance such as the height of a male also predicts relationship satisfaction (Brewer & Riley, 2009). For example, tall men are perceived as more attractive to women than short men (Gillis & Avis, 1980), thus, women prefer to be in a relationship with the former which leads tall men to have more opportunities to attractive women (Pawlowski & Jasienska, 2005). Women that are partnered with tall men may use different behaviors such as improving their physical appearances to prevent infidelity, being left alone, and promote mate retention (Brewer & Riley, 2009). This could contribute to relationship satisfaction as tall men find their partners more attentive.

Aside from these, romantic relationships are linked to individual subjective well-being (Campbell et al., 2005). Couples who are unhappy with their marriage tend to have lower levels of happiness, self-esteem and life satisfaction, and poorer health due to the heightened level of psychological distress (Hawkins & Booth, 2005). Romantic relationships can affect couples' subjective well-being and vice versa as they are related to each other. For example, when individuals do not feel happy in their marriage, this will most probably affect how they feel about themselves. Similarly, when individuals do not feel good about themselves, they might carry this feeling into their marriage, affecting the relationship quality (Myers, 2003; Reis et al., 2000). Past study has concluded that couples who have high subjective well-being will have positive relationships with their partner (Dush & Amato, 2005). Once an individual feels satisfied with their own romantic relationships, they will have higher life satisfaction.

Apart from that, a possible factor in affecting marriage and subjective well-being is cultural differences. Culture extends beyond the influence of economic development, thus, implying the meaning that culture helps in shaping marriage norms (Gundelach & Kreiner, 2004). The shaping of marriage norms is crucial because it is responsible for the social meaning attached to the concept of marriage. For instance, intermarried Native American women experienced greater levels of distress as compared to their endogamous counterparts (Bratter & Eschbach, 2006) and African American people with non-African American partners reported worse physical health and higher psychological distress as compared to couples who are of the same race (Barr et al., 2014).

The duration of marriage also plays a role in determining marital satisfaction. Most married couples experience higher levels of satisfaction in early stages of marriage but it decreases over time (Halford, 2004). Studies (Orathinkal & Vansteenwegen, 2006; Bradbury et al., 2000) agree that couples who have spent 10 years or more together have passed the adaptation stage and faced less psychological problems and stress because they are more familiar with their partner's expectations of them and the relationship, and their likes and dislikes so there is lesser chance for disagreements and conflicts to happen.

Additionally, the presence of children impacts the dynamic of relationship satisfaction as well (Tavakol et al., 2016). Bearing children produces positive emotions such as the feeling of pride and happiness, although, at the same time, it also evokes negative emotions due to tiredness, lack of personal time and disagreement over childcare and homework. However, the presence of children or increase in number of children in a family develops fewer opportunities for communication between couples which can lead to depression and anxiety that adversely impact relationship satisfaction.

3. Positive State in Building Positive Relationship

Resilience helps individuals to cope with difficult life events because when individuals are resilient, they are able to go through adverse events without succumbing to them (Bogar & Hulse-Killacky, 2006).

Resilience in individuals have been studied extensively throughout many instances such as among older adults, where there was a reported increase in resilience after an emotional intelligence intervention (Delhom et al., 2020). Among male college students in China, it is found that resilience has a stronger association with psychological distress as compared to social support, but this was not found in female college students (Zhang et al., 2018). Past studies found that resilience positively affects one's well-being, physical and mental health throughout life span (Van der Hallen et al., 2020).

Moreover, the co-occurrence of resilience and formation of romantic relationships has been garnering attention from researchers (Smith et al., 2012). In maintaining marriage resilience for immigrant women, a combination of factors such as spouse, children, and economic activity played a major role. Furthermore, researchers (Bradley & Hojjat, 2017) reported that resilience is an important factor of predicting marital satisfaction as there is a positive association between resilience and marital satisfaction (Kays & Yarhouse, 2010). Prior to formation of relationships, resilient individuals possess characteristics that enable them to cope with stressful life events (Bradley & Hojjat, 2017). Resilient characteristics such as confidence in one's ability to manage any conflicts are related to higher marital satisfaction as well (Neff & Broady, 2011). Other resilient characteristics include positive self-efficacy, adaptation style, and relationship satisfaction. An individual's ability to adapt to the environment (Smith et al., 2012) has been associated with other positive outcomes such as fewer behavioral problems (Conway & McDonough, 2006) and faster cardiovascular recovery under experimental stressors (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004).

Romantic partners that are resilient are able to handle conflicts better than non-resilient couples (Bradley & Hojjat, 2017) as they have a strong sense of self-efficacy, creative problem-solving abilities, excellent communication skills, and able to provide social support as well as being goal oriented. Not only that, but resilient individuals are also less likely to be pessimistic about their relationships, hence, being confident in their capabilities to solve their marital issues (Bradley & Hojjat, 2017). Resilient individuals deal with bereavement that follows an interpersonal loss such as death of a spouse more positively than non-resilient individuals (Bonanno, 2005). Similarly, Cohn and Fredrickson (2009) reported that when dealing with stressors, resilient individuals displayed higher levels of positive emotions and mindset compared to their less resilient peers despite both groups experiencing similar levels of negative emotions.

Additionally, the association between positive mindset and resilience is transactional as individuals who experience greater positive emotions were found to be more resilient when faced with adversity (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Positive emotions that are part of an individual's innate traits are reported to have built resilience while positive emotions derived from the environment increases resilience in immediate stressful and negative situations (Zautra et al., 2005). In marital context, the accumulation of life-related stress such as financial difficulties result in a phenomenon called stress spillover (Randall & Bodenmann, 2009). However, contrary research highlights that emergence of negative life events such as cancer (Neff & Broady, 2011) and natural disasters (Cohan &

Cole, 2002) resulted in marital improvements among couples. Besides, a study conducted on a total of 61 newlywed couples reported that spouses who display effective problem-solving skills in the early years of marriage despite being presented with moderate life stressors exhibited higher resilience by displaying less stress spillover effects (Neff & Broady, 2011).

Given these points, individuals who are resilient will be creative when creating solutions to their marital issues, hence, maintaining their marital satisfaction (Bradley & Hojjat, 2017). People who have a high level of resilience are good at solving their romantic relationships' issues as they have high positive emotions which will improve mental flexibility and proliferate engagement in novel activities within interpersonal relationships (Garland et al., 2010).

4. Positive Mindset in Building Positive Relationship

Mindfulness happens through paying attention purposefully, being present in the moment and not being judgmental of one's own feelings (Kabat-Zinn, 1993). It can be related to positive psychological outcomes which includes less emotional reactivity and greater well-being (Gesell et al., 2020).

Mindfulness might affect romantic relationships positively as it can enhance connection and closeness (Kabat-Zinn, 1993). The trait mindfulness was measured with the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) and showed positive association with relationship satisfaction that was assessed with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) (Barnes et al., 2007; Wachs & Cordova, 2007). Mindfulness may give positive effect to romantic relationships as the receptive attentiveness in being mindful may increase the willingness or ability to take interest in one's partner's emotions, thoughts, and welfare (Barnes et al., 2007). It can be concluded that people with better mindfulness may perceive stressful events as challenges instead of threats (Kabat-Zinn, 1993) and it is less likely for them to respond impulsively and react negatively (Don & Algoe, 2020) but respond constructively (Barnes et al., 2007). Couples who are more mindful have the tendency to show lower levels of negative emotions, higher levels of being able to tolerate distress and communicate their emotions and perceive their partner more positively after a conflict. In a study, mindfulness was found to be more common among older individuals and in long-term relationships compared to younger individuals and in early stage relationships (Lenger et al., 2019). High levels of mindfulness seemed to reduce the risk of relationship breakups for individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety (Saavedra et al., 2010) as they no longer see potential threatening relationship events as threatening. This would then reduce the frequency of their hyperactivating behavior, thus, strengthening their relationships. Finding also suggest that when individuals are mindful towards their partners, neural circuitry related to safety, security and positive emotion may be activated within the romantic relationship (Jones et al., 2011) which contributes to relationship satisfaction.

Usually, the imperfections of a partner may build irritation, disappointment, or any negative emotion. For instance, individuals who have low tolerance to the negative emotions in their relationship will tend to be less accepting and change the innate traits of their partners. This usually happens when people have low mindfulness trait due to natural urges to engross themselves in the negative emotions, hence, increasing their distress (Ciesla et al., 2012). Aside from engrossing themselves in their emotions, people with less mindfulness will also try to suppress the negative emotions (Hayes et al.,

1996). Compared to people who have less tolerance and mindfulness, people with high mindfulness trait are more tolerant towards negative experiences because they will consider the experiences as natural fluctuations. People with a high level of mindfulness are less likely to change their partners as they believe that the imperfections of their partners are impermanent (Creswell, 2017). In other words, it is easier for people to accept their partners who are not always perfect due to their high mindfulness trait. Therefore, mindfulness is positively associated with partner acceptance which will help build a positive relationship.

Apart from being tolerant and attentive, mindfulness is also associated with forgiveness and empathy (Johns et al., 2015). It is suggested that mindfulness skills are able to facilitate forgiveness among people that have experienced interpersonal betrayal (Johns et al., 2015). It is easier for people with high mindfulness to forgive their partners because the increase of mindfulness has been proven to be associated with high empathic concern and perspective taking (Dekeyser et al., 2008). Furthermore, high mindfulness is related to a number of positive interpersonal interactions (Dekeyser et al., 2008), higher relationship satisfaction and less relationship conflict (Barnes et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2011). Hence, making an impact on facilitating forgiveness (Jones et al., 2011). On the contrary, high mindfulness is inversely related to negative affectivity such as anxiety and depression (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Cash & Whittingham et al., 2010). Researchers found that mindfulness is able to increase emotional recovery from horrible events as individuals do not avoid their negative thoughts and feelings (Davidson, 2010). Therefore, it is easier for them to forgive their partners. For example, a person who is mindful will be more observant and compassionate when dealing with an unfaithful partner (Jones et al., 2011). Despite the circumstances, mindfulness will still be able to facilitate forgiveness between romantic partners.

In conclusion, mindfulness will increase the quality of romantic relationships, with the addition of it enhancing interaction styles. Hence, promoting healthy relationship functioning (Jones et al., 2011).

5. Conclusion

Couples who have positive relationships will have lower allostatic load which will positively impact their physiological and psychological well-being. Anyone can achieve positive relationships if support and critical problem solving skills are present in the relationship. Unfortunately, it is not easy to maintain or improve the level of intimacy in the relationship due to couples' commitments that increase over time. When level of intimacy among partners decreases, marital distress, separation and divorce can happen which could then impact their physical or mental health.

It was discussed that a combination of positive state and mindset can help individuals to facilitate positive relationships. Positive state of the individuals in the romantic relationship can impact the dynamic of their relationship as it was studied that couples who are resilient tend to handle their conflicts better as researchers have agreed that relationship resiliency helps individuals cope with difficult life events. Mindfulness or positive mindset is also proven to be a crucial component in helping couples to achieve positive relationships through improved interpersonal connection and closeness in relationships.

However, a positive state and mindset are not the only components that can help to predict positive relationships as there are many other factors that contribute to relationship satisfaction such as socioeconomic status and attachment styles. Therefore, future researchers may improve the literature in interpersonal relationship studies by exploring other components and elements that construct a positive relationship.

Acknowledgement

We thank the UCSI University for providing us the UCSI University Research Excellence & Innovation Grant (REIG) (Project code: REIG-FOSSLA-2020/046) to conduct this research and UCSI University Institutional Ethics (Reference code: IEC-2021-FOSSLA-007) who granted the ethical approval to conduct the study.

Funding

This study received funding from UCSI University Research Excellence & Innovation Grant (REIG) (Project code: REIG-FOSSLA-2020/046).

Conflict of Interests

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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