

## Effects of Marriage Quality upon the Mental Health of Parents and Their Adult Offspring

Ronghua Wei<sup>1</sup>, Yuzhong Wang<sup>2</sup>, Bangli Liu<sup>3</sup>

1. Henan Provincial Communications Polytechnic Institute, Zhengzhou, Henan 450052, China;

2. Psychology Department, School of Education, Zhengzhou University, Zhengzhou, Henan 450052, China

3. School of Foreign Languages, Zhengzhou University, Zhengzhou, Henan 450052, China

**Abstract: Aim.** To probe into the effects of marriage quality upon the mental health of parents themselves and their adult offspring. **Methods.** The Symptom Checklist-90 (SCL-90) is applied to and marriage quality questionnaire is carried out among 255 college students, and results have been analyzed. **Results.** Marriage quality appraised by parents themselves is negatively correlated to most of their factors in SCL-90 ( $P < 0.05$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ). Marriage quality appraised by father shows negative correlation with mother's total score and her most factors in SCL-90 ( $P < 0.01$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). Marriage quality of parents also shows negative correlation with the total score and most factors of their adult offspring in SCL-90 ( $P < 0.05$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ). Marriage quality of parents during the earlier years of their married life is more negatively correlated to their factors in SCL-90 than the marriage quality at present ( $P < 0.05$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ). **Conclusion.** The mental health of middle-aged couples is correlated to their marriage quality. Husbands normally feel that marriage quality exerts greater influence on the mental health of wives. Marriage quality of parents may also have effects upon the mental health of their adult offspring, and particularly the marriage quality of parents during the earlier stage of their married life may produce greater influence upon the mental health of their adult offspring. [Life Science Journal. 2006;3(1):89-93] (ISSN: 1097-8135).

**Keywords:** parents' marriage quality; adult offspring; mental health; effects

### 1 Introduction

The stress theory in medical psychology is a theory about the psychosomatic relationship. It emphasizes the effect brought about by stress life events upon a person's mental health. Then, what stress life events will exert significant effects upon man's mental health? In the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS) worked out by Holmes and Rahe, which contains 43 life events, 16 life events belong to categories of family, marriage and sexual life (Rabin, 1976). In the Life Events Scale (LES) which covers 50 kinds of life events and is prepared by Yang Desen et al, 28 items relate to marriage and family (Yang, 1990). This indicates that family and marriage are major stress factors which produce great effects upon people's mental health. To modern people who normally work outside, family could serve as a base camp which may help stabilize one's mentality psychologically.

Some studies of mental health and marriage quality had been conducted during the early 1980s (Dobson, 1987). These studies have found that the female shows more mental symptoms in miserable marriages, and in general, wives are more

likely to be affected by marriage changes than husbands, thus mental problems are more likely to occur among wives (Moffit, 1986). In the 1990s some investigations and analyses had been conducted by Liu Peiyi and others among 118 intellectual couples. Results showed that mental health only correlated to the self-rated marriage happiness, and it did not correlate to the marriage happiness appraised by others. As to the effects of the couple's marriage quality upon the mental health of their offspring, most efforts, in terms of the age of their offspring, have been made on the study of effects upon infants and school-aged children. Yu Guoliang and others have discovered that marriage relationship is quite positively correlated to parenthood (Yu, 2003). In terms of influence ways of marriage, studies have been concentrated on the effects of divorce upon the offspring's mentality and personality (Li, 1999). After all, divorced couples are of minority in China. The majority of couples have their marriage kept. What effects does the quality of their marriage have on the mental health of themselves and their children? Do such effects still exist when their children have left home for college study? These questions will be discussed in this paper.

## 2 Objects and Methods

### 2.1 Measuring tool and questionnaire designing

Symptom Checklist-90 (SCL-90), the most popular measuring tool for mental hygiene applied both at home and abroad, is used to check the objects' mental health level through the total score and the scores of 10 factors. Meanwhile, principal subjects concerning marriage quality have been chosen and a questionnaire been designed. The questionnaire includes, among other things, satisfaction of sexual life self-rated by the couple themselves, their feelings about the satisfaction and stability of their marriage. Furthermore, both the parents and their children are encouraged to evaluate the satisfaction and stability of the marriage so as to understand its objectivity and reality.

### 2.2 The selection of samples under study

As many as 280 students majoring respectively in liberal arts, science, engineering and medical science were randomly selected at a comprehensive university, and an investigation was conducted by questionnaire among them about their mental health. In accordance with their registered home addresses, a sealed questionnaire about adults' marriage affairs and SCL-90 were mailed to the students' parents. Each student's response to the investigation was put as a set together with the returned questionnaire from the parents (510 copies altogether, making 255 pairs). 255 copies of valid answers from students were obtained, thus we got 255 sets ( $255 \times 3 = 765$ ).

### 2.3 General conditions of samples under study

**2.3.1** Gender of college students: 104 male, accounting for 40.78%; 151 female, making up 59.22%.

**2.3.2** Age of parents: The average age of sampled parents is  $46.70 \pm 6.73$ , among which the average age of father is  $47.15 \pm 6.55$  and that of mother is  $46.34 \pm 6.17$ .

**2.3.3** Life background of samples investigated: Parents of 113 students come from the countryside, accounting for 44.3%; 52 couples are from county seats, accounting for 20.4%; 56 couples are from medium- and small-sized cities, accounting for 22.0%; and 34 couples are from provincial capital cities or municipalities directly under the central government, accounting for 13.3%. The life background of the students was the same as that of their parents before they came to the university.

**2.3.4** Education background of parents: 25 persons are illiterate, accounting for 4.9%; 70 people have received primary education, accounting for 13.87%; 135 persons have graduated from junior

middle schools, making up 26.5%; 134 persons have finished senior middle school, accounting for 26.3%; 47 people are two-year-college graduates, 9.2%; 61 persons are three-year-college graduates, 12%; 36 persons have got bachelor degrees, 7.1%; 2 persons have respectively held a master degree and a doctorate degree, accounting for 0.39%; with 510 persons in all.

Statistic analysis has been conducted to those returned questionnaires by way of SPSS 10.1.

## 3 Results

By marriage quality we mean here the one respectively evaluated by father, mother and the offspring. Results show that there is no significant difference between the evaluation made by parents and that by the offspring, which indicates the index is true.

The marriage quality self-rated by both the father and mother may exert influence not only on their own psychological symptoms, but also on those of their spouse and offspring. Therefore, correlated analyses have been made not only of the self-rated marriage quality, their own factors in SCL-90 and the total score, but also of the self-rated marriage quality, the factors of the their spouse and offspring in SCL-90 and the total score. Marriage quality also includes the evaluated quality of marriage during the early stage of married life and the marriage quality rated at the time of questionnaire.

### 3.1 Analyses of the correlation of parents' marriage quality with their psychological symptom level

**3.1.1** Analysis of the correlation of the father's psychological symptom level with the marriage quality evaluated by the father: From the statistic results we can see that the earlier stage of marriage satisfaction rated by the father bears significantly and highly significantly negative correlation with most of his own factors in SCL-90 (except the marriage satisfaction and factors 3 and 6, marriage stability and factor 10, sexual life and factors 3, 5, 6, and 10). The marriage satisfaction evaluated by father at present shows significantly and highly significantly negative correlation with his own factors 4, 7, 8 and 9 and the total score in SCL-90. The marriage stability and sexual satisfaction self-rated by the father bear significantly and highly significantly negative correlation with the total score and all factors except factors 6 and 10.

**3.1.2** Analysis of the correlation of the marriage quality evaluated by the father with the mother's psychological symptom level: Generally speaking,

marriage quality evaluated by the father bears high correlation with the wife's factors in SCL-90. Apart from the fact that there exists no significant correlation between the marriage quality at the early stage of married life and factor 1 in SCL-90, between sexual satisfaction at the early stage of married life and factor 10 in SCL-90, and between the marriage satisfaction at present and factor 2 in SCL-90, the rest factors in SCL-90 and the total score bear significantly or highly significantly negative correlation with the marriage quality both at the early stage of married life and at present, indicating that the marriage quality evaluated by the father exerts greater psychological influence upon the wife than upon himself.

**3.1.3** Analysis of the correlation of the marriage quality evaluated by the mother with her own psychological symptom level: The marriage quality evaluated by the mother is correlated with only a few of her own factors in SCL-90. For instance, her marriage satisfaction at the early stage of married life bears highly significantly negative correlation with only factors 4 and 6 in SCL-90; her sexual satisfaction at the early stage of married life has significantly or highly significantly negative correlation with factors 3, 4, 6 and 7 in SCL-90. The marriage stability possesses no significant correlation with every factor in SCL-90. But the mother's marriage satisfaction at present shows significantly negative or highly significantly negative correlation with factors 2, 4 and 6 in SCL-90; the marriage stability has significantly negative or highly significantly negative correlation with factors 1, 2, 4, 6, 8 and 9 in SCL-90; whereas the sexual satisfaction bears significantly negative or highly significantly negative correlation with the total score and all factors except factor 7.

**3.1.4** Analysis of the correlation of the marriage quality evaluated by the mother with the father's psychological symptom level: The marriage satisfaction and stability at the early stage of married life evaluated by the mother bear no significant correlation with any of father's factors in SCL-90. But sexual satisfaction has significantly negative or highly significantly negative correlation with factors 6 and 10. Only factor 2 bears significantly negative or highly significantly negative correlation with mother's present marriage satisfaction, stability and sexual satisfaction.

### **3.2 Analysis of the correlation of parents' marriage quality with the psychological symptom level of their adult offspring**

**3.2.1** Analysis of the correlation of the marriage quality evaluated by the father with every factor of

their adult offspring in SCL-90: From Table 1 we can see that the marriage quality at the early stage evaluated by father has significantly negative or highly significantly negative correlation with the total score and most of their offspring's factors in SCL-90 (except that marriage satisfaction does not correlate to factors 5, 8 and 10, nor does marriage stability correlate to factors 7, 8 and 10, nor sexual life to factors 6, 8 and 10). However, the present marriage satisfaction bears significantly negative or highly significantly negative correlation with only factor 10 and the total score; the present marriage stability shows significantly negative or highly significantly negative correlation with nine factors in SCL-90 (except for factor 10 and the total score); the present sexual life also bears significantly negative or highly significantly negative correlation with the total score and most factors (except for factors 1, 3 and 6).

**3.2.2** Analysis of the correlation of the marriage quality evaluated by mother with every factor of the offspring in SCL-90: Comparatively speaking, marriage quality evaluated by mother correlates with fewer number of factors and total score in SCL-90 than that of father, but her correlation shows higher degree in significance than that of father's. The marriage satisfaction and stability at the early stage of married life evaluated by mother have significantly negative or highly significantly negative correlation with the total score and most of her offspring's factors in SCL-90 (except that her marriage satisfaction does not correlate with her offspring's factors 4, 6 and 9; nor does her marriage stability correlate to her offspring's factors 8 and 10). Whereas her sexual life shows significantly negative or highly significantly negative correlation with only the total score and factors 4 and 5. Her marriage satisfaction at present, just like that of father's, bears highly significantly negative correlation with only factor 10 and the total score. Mother's marriage stability at present has significantly negative or highly significantly negative correlation with all factors in SCL-90 except for factors 2, 7, 10 and the total score. The sexual life at present evaluated by mother only possesses significantly negative or highly significantly negative correlation with factors 5, 8, 9 and the total score.

## **4 Conclusion**

Marriage change is the most important stress life event of people. It will surely produce some effects upon the mental health of the couple concerned and their offspring. Some meaningful conclusions have been reached in this study.

**Table 1.** The correlation of the couple's factors in SCL-90 with their marriage quality

SCL-90	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total Score
Marriage Quality											
Correlation of marriage quality evaluated by father with his factors in SCL-90:											
A	-.196**	-.161*	-.065	-.241***	-.132*	-.106	-.191**	-.126*	-.164*	-.112*	-.155*
B	-.165*	-.191**	-.160*	-.248***	-.186**	-.116	-.205**	-.217***	-.245***	-.140*	-.228**
C	-.124*	-.148*	-.077	-.193**	-.073	-.044	-.188**	-.117*	-.121*	-.052	-.124*
D	-.117*	-.115*	-.104	-.189**	-.108	-.079	-.156*	-.159*	-.139*	-.065	-.129*
E	-.180**	-.158*	-.178**	-.200**	-.192**	-.113	-.172**	-.186**	-.198**	-.116	-.211**
F	-.239***	-.283***	-.168*	-.225***	-.152*	-.119	-.158*	-.138*	-.180**	-.148*	-.250***
Correlation of marriage quality evaluated by father with mother's factors in SCL-90:											
A	-.105	-.161*	-.154*	-.261***	-.250***	-.210***	-.194*	-.250***	-.269***	-.180**	-.275***
B	-.066	-.191**	-.200**	-.230***	-.245***	-.151*	-.140*	-.221***	-.229***	-.138*	-.239***
C	-.109	-.148*	-.150*	-.240***	-.252***	-.223***	-.123*	-.219***	-.185**	-.118	-.258***
D	-.018	-.115*	-.125*	-.261***	-.171**	-.171**	-.128*	-.187**	-.178**	-.161*	-.171*
E	-.077	-.158*	-.181**	-.282***	-.239***	-.234***	-.140*	-.223***	-.229***	-.157*	-.215**
F	-.224***	-.283***	-.207**	-.311***	-.251***	-.346***	-.163*	-.273***	-.239***	-.254***	-.374***
Correlation of marriage quality evaluated by mother with her own factors in SCL-90:											
A	-.061	-.075	-.053	-.204**	-.076	-.145**	-.042	-.120*	-.037	-.086	-.144*
B	.024	-.035	-.095	-.125	-.089	-.066	-.010	-.066	-.047	-.077	-.087
C	-.093	-.106	.426***	-.192**	-.124*	-.163*	-.433***	-.026	-.007	.110	-.127*
D	-.084	-.152*	-.109	-.278***	-.077	-.135*	-.006	-.121	-.085	-.123	-.097
E	-.141**	-.212**	-.128*	-.230***	-.130	-.131*	.032	-.180**	-.171**	-.097	-.110
F	-.178**	-.266**	-.137*	-.331***	-.186**	-.258***	-.109*	-.224***	-.216***	-.185**	-.244***
Correlation of marriage quality evaluated by mother with father's factors in SCL-90:											
A	-.039	-.075	-.005	-.125*	-.028	-.032	-.067	-.073	-.057	.001	-.067
B	-.068	-.035	-.023	-.096	-.021	-.067	-.081	-.023	-.096	.006	-.104
C	-.023	-.106	-.025	-.032	-.021	-.416***	.006	.000	-.027	-.156*	-.034
D	.033	-.152*	.063	-.021	.052	-.007	.092	-.014	.006	.028	.006
E	-.092	-.212**	-.061	-.117*	-.068	-.114*	-.021	-.063	-.123*	-.061	-.125*
F	-.080	-.215**	.040	-.045	.022	.023	.065	-.006	-.073	.022	-.077
Correlation of marriage quality evaluated by father with offspring's factors in SCL-90:											
A	-.142*	-.164**	-.133*	-.160**	-.108	-.139*	-.151**	-.082	-.286**	-.034	-.182**
B	-.163**	-.164**	-.182**	-.141*	-.126*	-.115*	-.109	-.065	-.169**	.055	-.189**
C	-.113*	-.110*	-.151**	-.162*	-.131*	-.103	-.196**	-.061	-.212**	-.079	-.185**
D	-.099	-.095	-.078	-.041	-.089	-.082	-.085	-.097	-.045	-.183**	-.124*
E	-.184**	-.127*	-.170**	-.159*	-.146**	-.136*	-.112*	-.117*	-.117*	.087	-.053
F	-.104	-.146**	-.091	-.131*	-.130*	-.078	-.135*	-.113*	-.224**	-.230**	-.161**
Correlation of marriage quality evaluated by mother with offspring's factors in SCL-90:											
A	-.125*	-.149*	-.160**	-.078	-.156**	-.105	-.096	-.202***	-.094	-.164**	-.114*
B	-.227***	-.193**	-.199**	-.180**	-.152**	-.130*	-.223***	-.090	-.218**	.038	-.178**
C	-.035	-.039	.007	-.115*	-.405***	-.009	-.038	-.028	-.033	-.044	-.294**
D	-.039	-.075	.009	-.069	.001	.004	-.006	-.052	-.063	-.178**	-.185**
E	-.157**	-.083	-.196**	-.123*	-.111	-.177**	-.099	-.125*	-.126*	.031	-.094
F	-.072	-.102	-.066	-.112	-.121*	-.075	-.101	-.140*	-.202**	-.084	-.148*

Notice: The numbers 1 to 10 and letters A to F respectively stand for as follows: 1; Somatization; 2; Obsessive-Compulsive; 3; Interpersonal sensitivity; 4; Depression; 5; Anxiety; 6; Hostility; 7; Phobic anxiety; 8; Paranoid ideation; 9; Psychoticism; 10; Others. A; Marriage satisfaction at the early stage of married life; B; Marriage stability at the early stage of married life; C; Sexual life at the early stage of married life; D; The present marriage satisfaction; E; The present marriage stability; F; The present sexual life.

Firstly, couple's subjective feeling about their own marriage, which sensitively indicates their marital changes, may serve as an index of marriage quality. There is no significant difference between the assessment made by the couple and that made by their offspring, which shows that such an index is subjective, true and objective as well.

Secondly, the psychological symptom level of a couple (i. e., most factors and the total score in SCL-90) respectively bears significantly negative or highly significantly negative correlation with the self-rated marriage quality (consisting of marriage satisfaction, stability and sexual satisfaction). This indicates that the subjective feelings of a couple

about their marriage may affect their own psychological symptom level, especially their depressive feeling and hostility. It is significant to notice that the sexual satisfaction respectively felt by husband and wife has significantly negative or highly significantly negative correlation with psychological symptom (most factors and the total score in SCL-90). This shows that sexual satisfaction is indeed a major factor which affects psychological symptom level (Locke, 1959). Great attention should be attached to this point in psychological consultation.

Thirdly, according to the study made by Liu Peiyi et al, mental health is only related to self-rated marriage happiness (Liu, 1991). In this study, we have found that the father's psychological symptom level is related to the self-rated marriage quality, but has no relation with the marriage quality evaluated by the mother, which agrees to the results of Liu Peiyi's study. However, we have discovered that mother's psychological symptom level is significantly related to the marriage quality evaluated by father (it bears significantly negative or highly significantly negative correlation with almost every factor in SCL-90 and the total score). Such result indicates that father is not sensitive to mother's mental feelings about the marriage, but mother is quite sensitive to father's mental feelings about the marriage. This, on one hand, is perhaps because the male is, comparatively speaking, not very sensitive; on the other hand, the male is likely to get some compensation from other aspects. The above discoveries have provided theoretic foundation for psychological consultation about marriage and sensitivity training of couples.

Fourthly, parents' marriage quality will exert some influence upon the mental health level of their offspring who have left home for college. Overall, effects of parents' marriage quality on the mental health level of the offspring is not so great as on that of parents themselves, but they are greater than the mother's on the father. This indicates that the children, though left home already, are still very sensitive to marital changes of their parents. Further analyses show that parent's marriage satisfaction and stability at the early stage will bring about greater influence upon their children's mentality than their marriage quality at present; the psychological influence of parents' marriage stability upon the children is much greater than that of marriage satisfaction and sexual satisfaction, the marriage stability evaluated by mother in particular. This proves that family life experiences in

one's childhood still have influences on people after they have grown up, and that maintenance of marriage provides protection for offspring's mental health. Besides, marriage quality of parents, judged from relative factors in SCL-90, will exert comprehensive influence upon psychological symptoms of the offspring.

Further efforts should be made to study the mechanism so as to understand better how marriage quality influences the mental health of couple themselves and their children.

#### **Acknowledgments**

This study is part of the key planned research project of Social Science of Henan Province (No. 2004FSH006)

#### **Correspondence to:**

Yuzhong Wang  
Psychology Department, School of Education  
Zhengzhou University  
Zhengzhou, Henan 450052, China  
Telephone: 86-371-6742-8778  
Email: wyz7941391@126.com

#### **References**

1. Chen Changhui. Symptom checklist 90 (SCL-90), rating scales for mental health, edited by Wang Xiangdong, et al. *Chinese Mental Health Journal* 1999 (revised and enlarged edition): 31-9.
2. Dobson KS. Marital and social adjustment in depressed and remarried women. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 1987;43(2):261-5.
3. Li Youhui, Li Hua, Wo Min. Paired study of personality characteristics of children from divorced families. *Chinese Mental Health Journal* 1999;13(5):302-3.
4. Liu Peiyi, He Mutao. Marriage, family and mental health — an analysis of 118 couples of young intellectuals. *Chinese Mental Health Journal* 1991;5(5):193-5.
5. Locke HJ, Wallace KM. Short marital-adjustment and prediction test: their reliability and validity. *Marriage and Family* 1959:160-78.
6. Moffit PF. Mental health in marriage: the roles of need for affiliation, sensitivity to rejection and other factors. *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 1986;42(11):68-72.
7. Rabin JG. Life events stress and illness. *Science* 1976;194:1013.
8. Yang Desen, Zhang Yalin. *Life Events Scales: Behavioral Medicine*. Hunan Normal University Press, Changsha, Hunan, China. 1990:285-301.
9. Yu Guoliang, Jin Donxian. Effects of marital and generational relations upon psychological behavior of 3-6-year-old children. *Psychology Science* 2003;26(4):508-610.

*Received September 22, 2005*