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Nicole German

Depression and Marital Adjustment in Couples with a Betrayal:

Does Trust Play a Mediation Role?

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Abstract

The current study investigated trust's mediation of the relationship between depression and marital satisfaction in individuals who had or had not suffered a betrayal. Self-report measures assessing dyadic trust, depressive symptoms, marital adjustment, and presence of betrayal were administered to couples as part of a larger study of forgiveness and family functioning. In couples who had experienced a betrayal, both trust and depression predicted marital satisfaction. In addition, trust mediated the relationship between depression and marital satisfaction in women who had experienced a betrayal. In men who had experienced a betrayal, trust predicted marital satisfaction but not depression; thus, mediation was not established. Possible reasons for this gender difference as well as directions for future research are discussed.

Marital Satisfaction, Depression, and Betrayal

There is a robust link in the couples literature that the experience of depression in an individual is linked to marital satisfaction and marital dissatisfaction (Whisman, 1999, 2001). For instance, Herr, Hammen, & Brennan (2007) compared rates of depression of both married men and women and found that, regardless of gender, those classified as currently depressed also reported significantly lower marital satisfaction. Strikingly, the same study also found that those classified as formerly depressed also reported significantly lower current marital satisfaction, highlighting the strong and lasting link between depression and marital satisfaction. The association between depression and marital satisfaction is further bolstered by the finding that in couples in which the wife is depressed, both husband and wife report higher levels of marital dissatisfaction (Gotlib & Whiffen, 1989).

Evidence also suggests that the relationship between depression and marital satisfaction may be bi-directional. For example, in a longitudinal study Time 1 marital quality predicted Time 2 depression in both the depressed individual and his/her spouse (Beach et al., 2003), suggesting that lower marital satisfaction may negatively affect an individual's rate of depression. On the other hand, there is also evidence to suggest that depression may inhibit positive relationship interactions, causing lower satisfaction. Further, individuals who have experienced depression during adolescence experience more marital dissatisfaction later in life (Gotlib, Lewinsohn, & Seeley, 1998). This preponderance of evidence suggests that not only are depression and marital satisfaction linked, but this association is long lasting, affects both members of the dyad, and is a complicated bi-directional relationship.

There is also an association between betrayals and marital satisfaction which suggests that couples who have and have not experienced a betrayal may differ on a variety of relationship factors (Atkins et al., 2005; Atkins, Baucom, & Jacobson, 2001). Newlyweds asked to rate the likelihood they would experience infidelity over the course of their relationship, for example, gave higher ratings when marital satisfaction was lower (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). There is additional evidence that experiencing a betrayal alters the relationship between depression and marital satisfaction. For example, women who had been betrayed reported not only higher levels of negative relationship associations, but also reported depressive episodes (Hurst, 1999). Cano and O'Leary (2000) found that depression was significantly correlated with marital satisfaction when a humiliating life event, such as infidelity, was experienced. These studies suggest that not only are depression and marital satisfaction linked in general, but that the presence or absence of a betrayal within the relationship can affect the strength of the link between depression and satisfaction.

Trust as a Mediator

Trust is recognized as an important factor in interpersonal relationships (Gurtman, 1992; Rotter, 1980; Cottrell, Neuberg, & Li, 2006), but only a few studies have examined the direct link between trust and marital satisfaction itself. Previous research found that female partner's trust is predictive of levels of marital satisfaction (Johnson & Talitman, 1997), and that interpersonal trust is correlated with marital adjustment (Quinn & Odell, 1998). In couples, discrepancies in reported levels of trust are also linked to lower levels of marital satisfaction (Kelley & Burgoon, 1991), further suggesting that trust may be an important factor in marital satisfaction. The Partner Trust scale is associated with levels of marital satisfaction (Couch &

Jones, 1997). Rempel, Holmes & Zanna report that trust is important to the success of relationships because it provides a sense of emotional security within the couple (1985). Weiselquist et al. elaborates that trust provides the bridge between individual processes and traits and how these traits can begin to affect the partner and couple as a whole (1999). This suggests that trust is important in relationship satisfaction because it links individual factors to interpersonal factors.

Because trust may link internal and interpersonal processes, it makes sense that trust is also inextricably linked to betrayals. In fact, betrayals are linked to trust by their very definition—betrayals have often been literally defined as a breach of trust (Scheinkman, 2005). Gordon, Baucom, and Snyder define a “violation of trust” in and of itself as a major relational betrayal and suggest that without trust a relationship no longer seems to be as safe or secure (2000), once again suggesting that trust links the interpersonal factor (i.e., the betrayal) with an internal factor (i.e., feelings of security). Not only is trust linked to betrayals theoretically, Johnson, Makinen, & Millikin point out that when partners enter therapy to work through a betrayal, they are often seeking more than just closure from the betrayal, wanting to also rebuild trust that had broken down (2001).

In addition, depression and trust may also be linked. Depression has been found to be associated with rumination (Papageorgiou & Wells, 2003), suggesting that depressed individuals may attend more to the negative aspects of their relationship, leading to lower levels of trust. Empirical evidence supports this, as individuals who have experienced such trust violations have been found to be significantly more depressed, despite many having no previous history of major depressive disorder (Christian-Herman, O’Leary, & Avery-Leaf, 1997).

The Current Study

Though the relationships between trust and marital satisfaction, trust and betrayals, and trust and depression have been established, very little research has examined the path by which depression impacts marital satisfaction or explored dyadic trust as a potential mediator.

Therefore, the goal of the current study is to explore the potential mediational relationship of trust in the depression-marital satisfaction relationship. Additionally, because the research suggests a qualitative difference between couples who have and have not experienced a betrayal, the current study also seeks to establish whether this mediational relationship is the same or different between the two groups. The current study puts forth the following hypotheses:

- 1) Depression will predict marital satisfaction regardless of whether or not the participants have reported a betrayal.

- 2) Dyadic trust will predict marital satisfaction regardless of whether or not the couples experienced a betrayal.

- 3) Trust will mediate the effects of depression on marital adjustment for individuals who have experienced a betrayal but not for those individuals who do not report experiencing a betrayal. It is expected that feelings of depression will impact dyadic trust by causing the injured partner to attend selectively to the negative aspects of the relationship. This may lead, for example, to an individual catastrophizing about one's ability to trust his or her partner again, which would

subsequently decrease the level of dyadic trust in the marriage. This decrease in levels of trust is expected to lower satisfaction with one's partner.

Method

Participants

The current sample is comprised of 116 heterosexual married couples from the community, who volunteered to participate in a larger study of marital and family functioning at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville. Couples were recruited through a purchased mailing list. Participants ranged in age from 30 to 55 with a mean age of 41.7. Average length of marriage was 16 years. The average number of years of education was 14.9 for women and 15.6 for men. The sample was predominantly Caucasian (94.5% men, 94.8% women), which is fairly consistent with the demographics of the city in which the study was completed.

Measures

Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS; Spanier, 1976). The DAS is a 32-item self-report measure widely used as a measure of marital adjustment and satisfaction. This measure had adequate test-retest reliability, with an alpha of .87 for the total score (Carey, Spector, Lantinga, & Krauss, 1993). This instrument also had adequate criterion-related and construct validity, with Spanier reporting that it was significantly correlated with other existing measures of marital adjustment (Spanier, 1976).

Dyadic Trust Scale (DTS; Larzelere & Huston, 1980). The DTS is an 8-item self report measure which assesses the degree of trust one holds for his or her significant partner. The

reliability for this instrument was good ($r=0.93$). The scale is not significantly correlated with social desirability or a generalized trust scale, which seeks to determine trust for individuals outside of the dyadic relationship. The scale's validity was established through significant correlations with related concepts such as love, self-disclosure, and relationship status (Larzelere & Huston, 1980).

Center for Epidemiological Studies—Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). The CES-D is a 20-item self-report measure designed to assess depressive symptoms. It has been found to have adequate test-retest reliability, where correlations range from .51 to .67. The measure also had adequate internal consistency, with alphas from .85 to .90 (Radloff, 1977). Further, the measure is reliable for use for a large range of age and socioeconomic status (Hertzog, Van Alstine, Usala, Hultsch, & Dixon, 1990; Radloff, 1977; Roberts et al., 1990).

Procedure

After participants returned their signed informed consent statements, packets of questionnaires were mailed to them to complete. This study examines the responses to the DAS, DTS, and CES-D. Additionally, subjects were asked to report whether or not they had experienced a betrayal in their relationship with their spouse. Using this self-report data, participants were categorized into "Betrayal" and "No Betrayal" groups for further examination.

Results

Regressions Predicting Marital Satisfaction

Table 1 assesses Hypothesis 1, which predicted that depression would predict marital satisfaction, regardless of gender or betrayal condition. This table depicts the results of

TABLE 1

Depression predicting marital satisfaction by gender and betrayal condition

Variable	B	SE B	β
Wife--Betrayal	-0.956	0.251	-0.441**
Husband--Betrayal	-1.188	0.253	-0.519**
Wife--No Betrayal	-0.161	0.211	-0.136
Husband--No Betrayal	-0.409	0.197	-0.355

regression analyses of depression and marital satisfaction for each of the four groups separately (betrayal/wife, betrayal/husband, no betrayal/wife, and no betrayal/husband). For both men and women in the no betrayal condition, there was no significant relationship between depression and marital satisfaction. For both men and women in the betrayal condition, depression was significantly associated with marital satisfaction.

Table 2 addresses Hypothesis 2, that trust will predict marital satisfaction regardless of condition (betrayal/no betrayal and gender). This table shows the results of regression analyses of dyadic trust and marital satisfaction. In the No Betrayal condition, regardless of gender, there was no significant relationship between trust and marital satisfaction. In the betrayal condition,

TABLE 2.

Trust predicting marital satisfaction by gender and betrayal condition

Variable	B	SE B	β
Wife—Betrayal	1.387	0.178	0.705**
Husband—Betrayal	1.182	0.209	0.589**
Wife—No Betrayal	0.404	0.234	0.296
Husband—No Betrayal	0.701	0.260	0.442

trust and marital satisfaction were significantly associated for both men and women, though the relationship was slightly stronger among women than men.

Trust as a mediator

The final hypothesis of the current study was that trust mediates the effect of depression on marital satisfaction exclusively in couples who have experienced a betrayal. Because there were no significant relationships among variables in the No Betrayal conditions, these were not tested. In the Betrayal condition, mediational analyses were performed for men and women separately. According to Baron and Kenny (1986) the data must be significant in four different tests to prove mediation. First, depression and trust must be significantly correlated. Second, trust and marital satisfaction must also be significantly correlated. Third, depression and marital satisfaction must be significantly correlated. If all three can be proven, depression and trust must

be entered at the same time into a multiple regression equation predicting marital satisfaction. The results of this multiple regression must show that the significance of the relationship between depression and marital satisfaction has been reduced by the addition of trust.

Women’s Mediation

After the first three conditions of the mediation test were met, depression and dyadic trust were both entered into a multiple regression as predictors of marital satisfaction. After this test, trust remained a significant predictor of marital satisfaction. In addition, depression was no longer a significant predictor of marital satisfaction ($r^2=0.195, p<0.001$ vs. $r^2 =0.385^{**}, p<0.001$). Because this relationship was reduced so much as to be no longer significant, it was then necessary to perform Sobel’s test (1982). For women, a Sobel test confirms that trust mediates the relationship between depression and satisfaction ($-3.84, p<0.001$). Figure 1 illustrates the directionality of this relationship in women.

FIGURE 1.

Trust as a depression-satisfaction mediator in the betrayal condition women

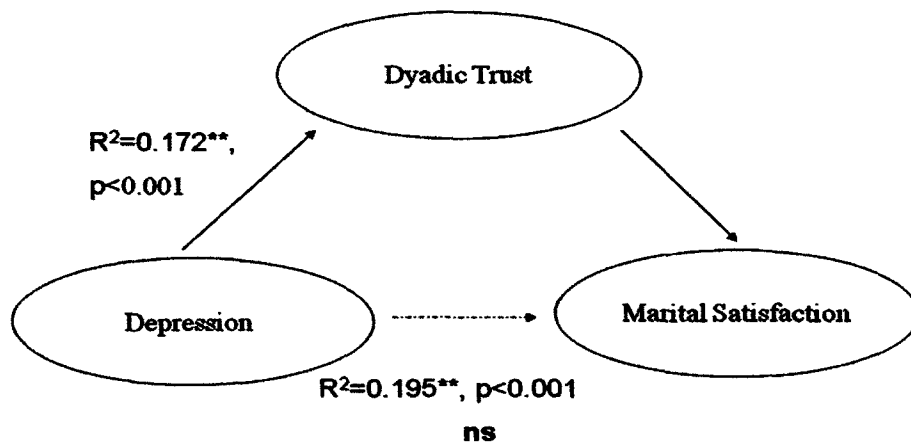
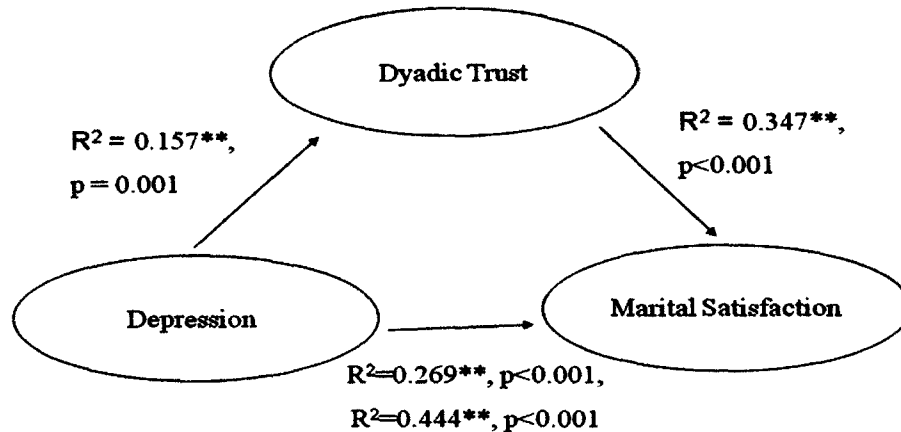


FIGURE 2.

The trust, depression, satisfaction relationship in betrayal condition men**Men's Mediation**

After the first three conditions of the mediation test were met, the data for depression and trust among men was entered into a multiple regression designed to predict marital satisfaction. The test showed that trust remained a significant predictor of marital satisfaction. However, depression remained a significant predictor of marital satisfaction and its significance was not reduced ($r^2=0.269^{**}$, $p<0.001$, $r^2=0.444^{**}$, $p<0.001$). Unlike the women's analyses, a mediational affect of trust on depression and marital satisfaction could not be shown. For men, depression and dyadic trust had independent relationships with marital satisfaction. Figure 2 illustrates the nature of this relationship in men.

Discussion

The first goal of the current study was to discover whether depression predicts marital satisfaction regardless of betrayal or gender. This hypothesis was partially supported. For

couples who have experienced a betrayal, however, depression did significantly predict marital satisfaction for both genders, though the relationship was slightly stronger amongst men. This finding is consistent with past research, which suggests that there is a strong link between depression and a decrease in marital satisfaction (Whisman, 2001). However, our results indicate that, in couples who have not experienced a betrayal, depression does not significantly predict marital satisfaction.

The discrepancy between these findings and the results of previous studies may suggest a qualitative difference in the participants in the non-betrayal condition. It suggests that the sample may have been subject to a ceiling effect, in which the level of marital satisfaction in each participant was too high to allow differences in depressive symptomology to be meaningfully linked to them. However, it may also be that, in couples who are not distressed from a betrayal, other positive factors in the relationship may serve as a protective buffer, preventing depressive symptomology from having a significantly negative impact on marital satisfaction as a whole.

The second goal of the study was to examine whether dyadic trust predicts marital satisfaction, regardless of gender or betrayal condition. Once again, this hypothesis gained partial support. In the betrayal condition, dyadic trust did predict marital satisfaction in both men and women, though the relationship was slightly stronger amongst women. This result falls in line with previous studies, which hypothesized that interpersonal trust would predict relationship satisfaction (Quinn & Odell, 1998). However, trust did not predict marital satisfaction among participants who had not experienced a betrayal. This counter-intuitive finding may also be due to a ceiling effect. Alternatively, it may be that discrepancies in trust

level within a couple is what causes a decline in marital satisfaction (Kelley & Burgoon, 1991), rather than the individual's own level of trust for his or her partner by itself. Couples who have not experienced a betrayal may share a fairly similar amount of trust, based on their shared experiences. However, when one member of the couple commits a betrayal, it may result in a larger trust discrepancy between the two. This difference in expectations may account for the failure of trust to predict marital satisfaction between the two conditions.

The third goal of the current study was to establish whether trust mediated the relationship between depression and marital satisfaction in those individuals who had experienced a betrayal. We hypothesized that, because a betrayal causes the depressed party to ruminate and attend more to negative aspects of the relationship, trust would decrease. We hypothesized that it was this decrease in trust that predicted a decrease in marital satisfaction. This hypothesis was also partially supported. Among individuals who had not experienced a betrayal, trust did not mediate the relationship between trust and marital satisfaction. This finding is consistent with the belief that it is the negative ruminations after a betrayal which trigger the mediational relationship. One reason for this differential finding may be that women make event-dependent attributions but men make schematic attributions (Sanford, 2005). Women may evaluate relationship functioning through the current situation. Thus, the event of the betrayal causes them to attend to immediately present negative issues, including trust issues, which may lead to lower marital satisfaction. Men, however, may focus their evaluations on the relationship as a whole. Although a betrayal will cause lower trust, thus lowering marital satisfaction, it may not be directly related to depression, as men are less likely to focus on a single event constantly. In other words, trust affects satisfaction because the relationship is bad

in general, not because the specific situation has caused depressed individuals to attend to trust issues.

Limitations and Future Directions

The results and implications of this study should be weighed in the context of its limitations. First, the method of data collection may have resulted in response biases. For example, couples filling out packets in the same room at home may have been reluctant to relate depressive emotions or to report betrayals because of the chance that their spouse could view their response. This may have contributed to the lack of reports of negative factors like depression and marital dissatisfaction in our sample, especially among couples who were not distressed enough to already be in dialogue about their problem areas.

Second, because a cross-sectional study design was employed, the results can be interpreted in a number of ways. This is especially salient when studying betrayals, as the passage of time after a betrayal may affect how strong trust's mediation of depression and marital satisfaction becomes. For example, a depressed individual whose partner betrayed him/her yesterday may be ruminating about the negative aspects of a relationship more than a depressed individual whose partner betrayed him/her five years ago and has since been making amends.

Despite these limitations, the current study adds to the literature regarding the ties between depression and marital satisfaction by clarifying what the role that trust can play in this relationship. Findings also suggest that betrayals may have a large impact on how much a depressed individual's relationship is affected by their individual psychopathology. More

research needs to be done to explore whether other variables such as validation, types of attachment, religiosity, type of betrayal, level of forgiveness and forgiving personality may also mediate the relationship between depression and marital satisfaction in couples who have experienced a betrayal. Future research should examine whether who committed the betrayal, husband or wife, has differential implications for a betrayal's effects on one's satisfaction, dyadic trust, and depression. Additional research should assess the effects of relationship investment on depression, trust, and marital satisfaction for those couples experiencing a betrayal.

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