

Is Intellectual Compatibility Between Spouses Necessary for a Stable Marriage ?

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Abstract : Is intellectual compatibility between spouses necessary for a stable marriage ? So far, no empirical study has been done which has directly answers this question. In this paper, an attempt has been made to answer this question based on the existing research data on marital satisfaction, conflicts in marriage and conflict resolution styles of partners.

1 Introduction

Intelligence and the institution of marriage are two most important characteristics of human beings that makes them biologically and socially superior to the rest of the animal kingdom. Intelligence and marital stability have been well studied, albeit independently, by psychologists. However, so far, no research study has been conducted which has attempted to find if intellectual compatibility between spouses is necessary for a stable marriage. In this paper, an attempt has been made to present both sides of the picture based on the existing psychological studies done in this area.

The question in itself is an important one, and has practical implications for mate selection. It is also of importance to psychologists, since it can not only help them predict the stability of a marriage, but also help couples cope up with conflicts in their marital life. Besides psychologists, it is also of interest to behavior geneticists interested in the study of assortative mating in human beings.

The studies done on marital satisfaction so far have mainly focused on personality traits and interpersonal perception of the spouses (Kelly,

1987), (Luckey, 1964), (Udry, 1967), (Barton et al., 1972). A few of these studies have also incorporated intelligence as one of the factors of personality that can have an impact on the marital life (Barton et al., 1972), (Blum & Mehrabian, 1999), (Botwin et al., 1997). However, in none of these studies, an attempt has been made to directly assess the need of intellectual compatibility between spouses for a stable marriage.

In this paper, we review existing evidences, both for and against necessity of intelligence similarity for marital stability. These evidences are drawn from studies conducted to assess personality correlates of marital satisfaction, conflicts in marriage life and conflict resolution styles of partners. However, since no empirical study has been done to directly assess the impact of intellectual compatibility on marital satisfaction, one cannot make any sweeping generalizations about the topic based on these evidences.

Before proceeding further, a comment on the operationalization of the terms “intelligence” and “stability” is necessary. Here, the term stability is used in a general sense, and includes not only the stability of marriages (i.e. whether the spouses remained together after a certain period of time, or they split up), but also for the satisfaction of the spouses in the marital relationships. Studies on marital life have used both these measures for assessing the quality of marital life. Intelligence in different studies is measured in different ways, some use the educational level of the spouses, some make use of the scores in standardized tests (e.g. SAT, GRE etc) whereas some use their own intelligence tests for assessing intellectual level of the individuals. In any case, the curious reader

is advised to refer to the original work, to be convinced about the methods that have been used for assessing stability of marriages and intelligence of individual in that particular study.

2 Evidences in favor of intellectual compatibility between spouses

The strongest evidence supporting need of intellectual compatibility between spouses comes from studies on assortative mating, which has been well studied in the context of behavioral genetics. It has been observed that individuals tend to select mates who are similar in personality traits to their own. Empirical studies (Blum & Mehrabian, 1999), (Botwin et al., 1997) have shown that there is a low, but consistent positive correlation between intelligence level of the two spouses in a marriage. Moreover, Botwin et al (Botwin et al., 1997) also report that individuals do in fact succeed in finding mates who embody the personality traits which they desire, and this is true for intelligence as well. The fact that individuals tend to select mates who are of similar intellectual level lends support to the hypothesis that intellectual compatibility is necessary for a stable marriages.

Another important study which assessed the impact of various personality factors on the different aspects of marital life was done by Barton et al (Barton et al., 1972). In their study, they incorporated social-intellectual equality as one of the factor of marital role influencing marital satisfaction. They report that a higher coefficient of socio-intellectual equality with the spouses is associated with “higher frequency of doing something pleasing”. Moreover, a low score on socio-intellectual equality reflected high number of differences about child rearing. This study too points to the fact that socio-intellectual equality of spouses is associated with a more stable marriage.

Another interesting study regarding similarity in marriage couples on the scale of mental abilities and rigidity-flexibility was done by Gruber-Baldini et al (Gruber-Baldini et al., 1995). In their study, they found that not only did the married couples initially were moderately positively correlated on intelligence scales, but also that over the time of marriage, they tend to become similar in their intellectual capabilities, particularly verbal meaning and word fluency. Although in their study they did not directly test of the couples who are

dissimilar are more likely to separate, they did mention that many of the spousal correlations were slightly higher in those couples which had a stable married, compared to those which had split in the course of time.

Thus the preponderance of data from correlational studies indicates that individuals prefer selecting mates who are similar in intellectual level. Of course, all these studies are correlational and none of them have attempted to study it in a cause-effect type of a relationship between intellectual compatibility and marital stability. Nevertheless, the data from the existing research studies does point to the fact the similarity in intelligence is indeed one important factor of marital stability.

3 Evidences against intellectual compatibility between spouses

The evidences against intellectual compatibility are mainly related to conflicts arising in marital life, and the manner in which the spouses resolve them. Conflict resolution is indeed an important factor of marital stability, because in intimate relationships like marriage, conflict are bound to arise, and if these conflicts are not resolved amicably, then it can have an adverse effect on marital life (Barry, 1970).

First, we consider the situation where the two spouses are of high intellectual level. Usually, there is a a high correlation between the intelligence level and the professional achievement of a person. Therefore, in such a situation, we expect that both the spouses have a comparable (and good) professional life. In this setting, there is likely to be a “competition”, in which an individual tries to outscore the spouse, which can lead to ego conflicts and difference of opinion. It has been observed that differences do arise between spouses, if both of them are in a good profession, particularly in aspects of spending leisure time together, and child birth and rearing.

Sternberg (Sternberg & Soriano, 1984) has noted that individuals tend to use physical and economic actions in a conflict rather than adopting amicable solution styles (like wait-and-see, accept-the-situation style), if they are low in cognitive abilities. A study on conflict styles in married couples by Buss (Buss, 1991) also reports that low

intellect of spouses is correlated with upsets in marital life, like neglect, inebriety and emotional constriction. Thus if both the partners are low on intellectual compatibility, then it is more likely that they will end up in intensifying their conflicts, instead of resolving them through peaceful means. In this situation, therefore, intellectual compatibility has a negative influence on the stability of marriages.

On the other hand, the existing literature on marital roles suggests that it is not intellectual compatibility which is important. Rather, one of the spouses should be higher on intellectual capabilities. Higher intellect is associated with more peaceful methods of conflict resolution (Sternberg & Soriano, 1984). In a recent study on personality and mate preferences, Botwin et al (Botwin et al., 1997) report that individuals whose spouse scored high in intellect-openness were generally satisfied with the marriage and perceived that a lot of love and affection were expressed in the marriage. In particular, this tendency was higher for female individuals. Barry (Barry, 1970) also mentions that if the husband is higher on “personality strength”, then the wife is generally satisfied with the marriage, and conflicts in such marriages are resolved amicably. Thus, it appears that intellectually compatibility is not a strict requirement for a satisfactory marital life, rather it is whether one of the spouses is high on intellectual scale which plays a more significant role.

4 Conclusions

In the beginning, an observation has been made that the lack of direct studies on the effect of intellectual compatibility of spouses prevents us from making sweeping generalizations on this topic. On one hand, we have substantial data from longitudinal studies which reflect that intellectual similarity, if not dissimilarity, is indeed an important factor of marital satisfaction. On the other hand, studies on conflict resolution in marriage indicate that it is not exactly intellectual compatibility, but whether one of the spouses is higher on intellectual capability, is more important for peaceful and satisfactory life. Indeed, at present, it is impossible to give a definite answer to this question. Only after an empirical study assessing the direct relation between these two factors is done, can one give an answer to the question posed in the starting of the paper.

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