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# Self-Disclosure Empathy and Sexual Satisfactions as the Factors Conditioning a Successful Marriage

## Introduction

Marriage has always been a significant form of co-existence between two partners. There is no doubt that for most people family life is a fundamental source of happiness. Being happy in marriage affects positively not only interpersonal relationships among family members but also their physical health as well as their professional and social activity. The atmosphere in a marriage conditions its quality (Komorovsky 1964; Fitzpatrick 1986).

Nowadays psychologists pay more and more attention to the problem of marital happiness, success, and satisfaction. Nevertheless, marriage disintegration becomes dangerously popular – the number of divorces and separations increases rapidly. How to prevent them should be the subject of thorough psychological researches with emphasis put on the necessary conditions of success and stability of the marital relationship.

In the present paper we assume that marital satisfaction is mainly guaranteed by the ability of genuine communication between partners and by empathic understanding of the partner's emotional states.

The research results obtained so far do not expose satisfactorily the factors mentioned in the title, which are responsible for the success in marriage.

Self disclosure and exchange of intimate information between partners is vital to marital functioning. Communication based on self-disclosure, friendliness and trust enables both partners to obtain factual information about themselves and, in turn, gives more possibilities of affecting each other. When the mutual self-disclosure exists in marriage, there is no need for defensive reactions. according to the statement: "I know I can be my real self in front of you, so be the same to me", which is in agreement with the reciprocity principle (Niebrzydowski 1992).

According to the investigations by Derlega and Chaikin (1976) expressing actual information about the self by one partner of a dyad has always given positive effects for it constituted a starting-point for better understanding between partners, which, in consequence, often led to the change of their attitudes towards each other.

Self-disclosure is connected with a friendly orientation towards the partner of interaction, which makes it possible not only to get to know him/her better but also to learn more about himself/herself. Such a profound understanding in marriage is vital in difficult family situations.

We suppose that an appropriate level of self-disclosure and empathy can guarantee satisfactory interactions in a dyad and also protect it against disintegration.

In marriage a close relationship refers not only to psychic bonds but also to physical ones. Quite often the latter determine the functioning of a dyad. Hence, investigations on marriage cannot ignore the problems of intimacy and sexuality among the partners (Janicka 1990).

## Empirical Section

In connection with the above assumptions three factors responsible for marital success have been distinguished: self-disclosure, empathy, and sexual satisfaction.

The investigations on their intensity levels require the determination of the following research aims:

1. Classification of marriages according to the levels of their satisfaction.
2. Determination of the levels of self-disclosure, empathy and sexual satisfaction of both partners from various groups of marriages.

## Investigation Methods

Collecting appropriate empirical data which give answers to the above problems required an application of the following methods:

- Marriage Success Scale by M. Braun-Galkovsky
- Self-disclosure Questionnaire by S. Jourard
- Empathic Understanding Questionnaire by A. Weglinsky
- Standardized Interview to Investigate Sexual Satisfaction by I. Janicka.

**Table 1:** Estimation of their parents' marriages by husbands and wives from the group of marriages under survey

Marriage Group	Husbands Estimation of parents' marriage				Wives Estimation of parents' marriages			
	agreeable	disagreeable	divorced	in separation	agreeable	disagreeable	divorced	in separation
I-satisfied	95 %	5 %	0	0	90 %	5 %	5 %	0
II-dissatisfied disagreeable	66,7 %	20 %	13,3 %	0	76,7 %	16,7 %	6,6 %	0
IV-dissatisfied	50 %	15,4 %	26,9 %	7,7 %	42,3 %	26,9 %	19,2 %	11,6 %
V-threatened	57,1 %	38,1 %	4,8 %	0	71,4 %	4,8 %	23,8 %	0

**Table 2:** Investigation results of five distinguished groups of marriages

Marriage Groups	Number of surveyed couples	Husbands					Wives				
		X Rm	δ	x Wzg	x I-R	x Im	x Rm	δ	x Wzg	x I-R	x Im
I	20	3,91	0,22	66,6 %	0,13	4,04	3,9	0,21	65,9 %	0,17	4,07
II	30	3,78	0,11	61,6 %	0,3	4,08	3,89	0,16	66,3 %	0,27	4,1
III	17	3,51	0,08	33,7 %	0,7	4,23	3,52	0,09	35,7 %	0,74	4,3
IV	26	3,25	0,22	34,8 %	0,78	4,05	3,04	0,30	29,1 %	0,94	3,99
V	21	3,75	0,30	88,2 %	0,24	4,06	3,38	0,32	28,4 %	0,87	4,23
Total	114										

x Rm - average evaluation of one's marriage

δ - standard deviations

x Wzg - average uniformity index between the answers from the 1st and 2nd parts of the test

x I-R - average gap between actual and ideal estimation of marriage

X Im - average estimation of ideal marriage

### Couples Under Survey

There were surveyed 144 marital couples according to the strictly fixed criteria: couples who got married for the first time; those who had children; who were healthy both physically and psychologically; and have been married for not less than three years.

On the basis of subjective descriptions of the marriages the following marriage groups have been distinguished:

- satisfied marriages, in which both partners express the same opinions on their relationships (I),
- satisfied marriages, in which the partners express different opinions on their relationships (II),
- unsatisfied marriages, in which both partners define their marriage as critical (III),

- unsatisfied marriages, in which both partners express different opinions on their relationship and their marriage is definitely of a conflict character (IV),
- threatened marriages, in which partners express antagonistic opinions on their relationship (V).

The marriage groups distinguished above can be considered five types of marriages.

### Levels of Self-Disclosure, Empathy, and Sexual Satisfaction

In all marriage groups (although qualitatively different) the levels of self-disclosure, empathy and sexual satisfaction of both partners have been defined. The data are given in Tables 3 and 4.

**Table 3:** Average indices concerning the level of revealing real selves to partners in the groups of marriages

satis- fied	Marriage Groups	Husbands		Wives	
		average self-disclosure	standard deviations	average self-disclosure	standard deviations
	agreeable	58,40	20,89	79,35	15,32
	disagreeable	69,70	21,17	77,83	18,53
dis- satis- fied	critical	50,00	20,17	37,35	12,12
	conflict	46,69	19,81	49,73	26,47
	threatened	68,00	25,88	40,85	31,73

**Table 4:** Attitudes of wives under survey toward their own original family

Marriage Groups	Husbands			Wives		
	positive	negative	indifferent	positive	negative	indifferent
I-satisfied agreeable	95 %	0	5 %	100 %	0	0
II-satisfied disagreeable	86,7 %	10 %	3,3 %	80 %	6,7 %	13,3 %
III-dissatisfied	90,5 %	9,5 %	0	71,4 %	23,8 %	4,8 %
IV-dissatisfied conflict	65,4 %	15,4 %	19,2 %	69,2 %	19,2 %	11,6 %
V-threatened	57,1 %	0	42,9 %	61,9 %	28,6 %	9,5 %

It follows from the data that the couples satisfied and not satisfied with their marriages vary to a significant extent according to the factors in question ( $P < .01$ ). Among satisfied diads empathy and self-disclosure of wives is higher than of husbands. The lack of such regularity in unsatisfied diads is unfavourable for the quality of their marriages. Considering sexual satisfaction satisfied husbands achieve better results than their wives. They also represent greater demands concerning the quality of their intimate contacts, which are proven by the difference between actual estimation of their sexual satisfaction and its ideal image.

The investigation results show that the degree of marital satisfaction is higher when the sexual satisfaction is accompanied by empathy. This dependence shows more clearly in group I. To the satisfaction of wives their own empathy ( $\alpha = .002$ ) and the sexual pleasure of their husbands ( $\alpha = .008$ ) suffice.

The dependence between the satisfaction of wives with their marriages and their empathy turned out to be stronger ( $r = .86$ ) than between the former and sexual sa-

tisfaction of their husbands ( $r = .57$ ), whereas the husbands' satisfaction with their marital relationships is strictly defined by their sexual pleasure ( $\alpha = .009$ ).

In the creation, development and even the maintenance of close marital relationships mutual self-disclosure seems to have a considerable role. It refers to many life problems, it not only delivers more psychic closeness. Only happily married couples (I and II) show the uniformity in interpersonal communication and the largest range of mutually discussed topics

Empathy constitutes a variable that determines the level of self-disclosure. Yet it does not denote the linear dependence. High empathy favours the optimum level of openness, i.e. adequate interaction conditions as well as needs and possibilities of communication between partners. However, a progressive tendency of empathy changes leads to the limitation of self-disclosure of wives and their husbands. We can say that the progressive changes of empathy make for its regulating function which affects the optimum level of self-disclosure.

**Table 5:** Comparison coefficients correlation ranks Spearman ( $r_s$ ) between self-disclosure husband and wife in 6 category topics

Marriage Groups	Category affirmations					
	Attitudes	Linking and inters.	Work	Money	Person	Body
$r_s$	$r_s$	$r_s$	$r_s$	$r_s$	$r_s$	$r_s$
I-satisfied agreeable	0,78	0,56	0,03	0,71	0,78	0,36
II-satisfied disagreeable	- 048	0,34	0,16	0,45	0,8	0,45
III-dissatisfied	0,3	0,15	- 0,09	0,47	0,05	- 0,16
IV-dissatisfied conflict	0,2	0,14	0,17	0,03	0,26	0,13
V-threatened	- 0,5	0,3	0,05	0,21	0,21	- 0,3

In happily married couples (I, II) mutual self-disclosure of partners and the possibilities of its perception are mainly due to the empathy of wives. Its high level stimulates self openness of a husband, which gives satisfaction to both partners ( $\alpha = .1$ ). Even self-disclosure of husbands with low empathy makes married couples satisfied if it is accompanied by a high level of wives' empathy ( $\alpha = .04$ ). Moreover, the latter contributes to high quality of sexual experience of their husbands ( $\alpha = .02$ ) as well as of their own ( $\alpha = .04$ ).

In unhappily married couples (III, IV) the relations between empathy and self-disclosure and between empathy and sexual satisfaction are deprived of any significant dependences. Too low empathy of partners does not guarantee understanding in a dyad and solution of its problems.

In threatened couples (V) wives' self-disclosure affects considerably the decrease of empathic sensitivity of their husbands ( $\alpha = .02$ ). Such dependence is due to the lack of regulating indices of sexual satisfaction that constitute independent variables for wives ( $r = .8$ ) and their husbands ( $r = .95$ ).

## Conclusion

Summing up, we can state that the analysis of our investigation results concerning empathy and sexual satisfaction in marriage makes it possible to define its quality and perspectives. Nevertheless, it turned out that the

only proper measure of effective communication in the dyads under survey was mutual self-disclosure.

The determination of partners' attitudes toward their own marriage, of levels of their empathy, sexual satisfaction and mutual self-disclosure should constitute the basis of actual therapy as well as an index of its effectiveness.

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