

Marital Satisfaction and Emotional Communication in Couples with an Alcoholic Member

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Introduction

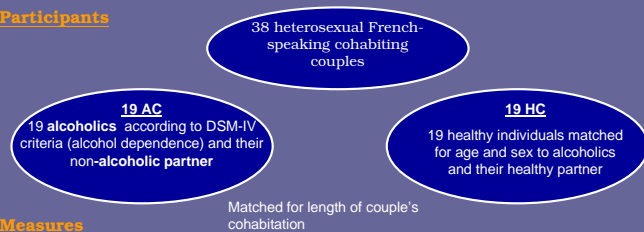
Most of the couples with an alcoholic member have reported low satisfaction about their couple relationship (review in Marshal, 2003). However, mechanisms implicated in those marital problems remained obscure. A good understanding of this phenomenon is crucial : high level of marital satisfaction and partner's implication on alcoholic treatment are good prognosis of reduction of alcohol consumption (e.g., Vannicelli et al., 1983).

- In **Healthy Couples (HC)**: High marital satisfaction is related to (1) high **awareness** of the partner's emotional feeling states (EFS), (2) high **self-esteem**, (3) low **depression** and **anxiety**.
- In **Alcoholic Couples (AC)**: These relations haven't been investigated yet.
 - Alcoholics have (1) deficits in decoding non-verbal emotional cues → could contribute to problems of awareness (review in Uekerman & Daum, 2008), (2) low self-esteem (review in Corte, 2007), (3) symptoms of depression and anxiety (e.g., Kushner et al., 2005).
 - Alcoholic partners have reported (4) more psychological distress than healthy individuals, including depression and anxiety (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2006). Self esteem and awareness of the spouse's EFS have not been investigated yet.

Object of the study: to compare correlates of marital satisfaction in AC and HC.

Methods

Participants



Measures

• **Marital satisfaction:** *Locke and Wallace Marital Adjustment Test* (Locke & Wallace, 1959)

Self-report questionnaire that evaluates marital life adaptation and more particularly happiness in marriage, adaptation with budget organization, with hobbies, with sexual functioning, with social relationships, with life philosophy and with endearments.

• **Awareness of the spouse's EFS:** *Part of a self-report questionnaire developed by the Catholic University of Louvain* (Belgium, Pr P.Philippot and Miss Tang).

Twenty four questions (on a 10-point Likert scale) related to (a) category of experienced emotions, (b) intensity, (c) frequency, and (d) control of these emotions. For each question, the subject has to evaluate (a) his or her own emotions (self-attributed items) and (b) the emotions experienced by his/her spouse (attributed to the spouse items) (e.g., "Do you feel shame? Never – Frequently", and "Do you think your spouse feels shame? Never – Frequently")

Score: sum of the absolute values of the difference between the subject's attributed to the spouse items and his/her spouse's self-attributed items on each questions of the questionnaire.

• **Self-esteem:** *Adult form of the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* (Coopersmith, 1967).

58-items self-report questionnaire that measures attitudes toward the self in four areas: (a) social, (b) familial, (c) personal, and (d) professional.

• **Depression and anxiety:** *Beck Depression Inventory II* (Beck, 1996) and *State and Trait Anxiety Inventory* (Spielberger, 1983)

Compared to CC members, AC members (the alcoholic and his/her partner) have reported
1. a **lower marital satisfaction**
2. a **poorer awareness** of the spouse's EFS.
3. a **lower self-esteem**
4. more **depressed and anxious symptoms**.

Results

Group comparisons

	Range	Alcoholic		Alcoholic Partner		HC	F	p
Marital satisfaction	2 -158 (higher)	94.31 (24.18)	=	81.47 (31.09)	<	118.53 (25.85)	16.31	<.001
Awareness	0 -108 (lower)	33.05 (8.56)	=	31.63 (9.55)	>	20.21 (7.41)	20.58	<.001
Self-esteem	0 -58 (higher)	29.63 (10.62)	=	33.11 (8.81)	<	40.26 (5.72)	7.60	<.001
Depression	0 - 63 (higher)	18.21 (11.46)	=	17.31 (9.13)	>	7.63 (8.21)	11.24	<.001
Anxiety	40 -160 (higher)	95.32 (28.17)	=	105.32 (25.99)	>	71.39 (20.04)	14.90	<.001

Correlational analyses

	Subject's Satisfaction		Spouse's Satisfaction	
	AC (n = 38)	HC (n = 38)	AC (n = 38)	HC (n = 38)
Awareness	.06	-.40*	-.14	-.49**
Self-esteem	.29	.27	.02	.22
Depression	-.21	-.11	.01	-.27
Anxiety	-.34*	-.38*	.07	-.21

➢ In AC, one significant correlations emerged: The more the subject was satisfied about his/her relationship, the more he/she reported low global anxiety

➢ In CC, four significant correlations emerged:

- The more the subject was satisfied about his/her relationship, the more he/she reported (1) high awareness of the spouse's EFS and, (2) low global anxiety
- The more the spouse was satisfied about his/her relationship, the more the subject reported (3) high awareness of the spouse's EFS

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Conclusions

➢ New findings:

- AC showed a more erroneous perception of their spouse's EFS than HC. The errors could be linked (1) to an impaired decoding of nonverbal behaviours, (2) to impaired verbal communication or (3) to discordance between expressed and felt emotions.
- The alcoholic as well as his/her partner report a low self-esteem compared to healthy subjects. The low self-esteem of both AC members could have repercussions on marital satisfaction (e.g., People with low self esteem have difficulty to find evidences of their partner's acceptance).

➢ We can speculate that social desirability in alcoholics interferes on the marital satisfaction self-reported measure

- Rychtarik et al. (1989): considerable redundancy between measures of social desirability and marital satisfaction in alcoholics but not in their wives
 - Alcoholics can minimize the seriousness of alcohol problems and their consequences on marital problems.
 - The interference of social desirability on the marital satisfaction measure could have biased the results, particularly the correlations in AC.

➢ These findings outline the necessity to include the alcoholic partner in the treatment. A couple based-intervention that teaches couples emotion regulation, communication, and problem-solving skills, and led the partners through an exploration of how strong feelings affect and are affected by their relationship could be effective.

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