Marital Satisfaciton 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., Vannucci et al., 1985).

In Healthy Couples (HC): High marital satisfaction is related to (1) high awareness of the partner’s emotional states (EPS), (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 detecting non-verbal emotional cues → could contribute to problems of awareness (review in Uekermann & Daum, 2008), (2) low self-esteem (review in Corte, 2003), (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 EPS have not been investigated yet.

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

Methods

Participants

- 19 AC (9 alcoholic due to DSM IV criteria and alcoholic cohabiting partners who their non-alcoholic partners).
- 19 HC (19 healthy individuals matched for age and sex to alcoholics and their healthy partner).

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 EPS: 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”. When AC and HC are compared, 4 new items of the questionnaire have been added: “I consider my spouse is jealous” and “I consider my spouse feels shame”.
- 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 (Spyker & Berger, 1983).

Results

Group comparisons

- AC: 38 heterosexual French-speaking cohabiting couples.
- HC: 38 healthy individuals matched for age and sex to alcoholics and their healthy partner.

- AC (n = 38)
- HC (n = 38)

Group variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Alcoholics</th>
<th>Alcoholics Partner</th>
<th>HC</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (in years)</td>
<td>47.53</td>
<td>47.29</td>
<td>47.53</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education (in years)</td>
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<td>12.05</td>
<td>12.05</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital satisfaction</td>
<td>84.21</td>
<td>84.05</td>
<td>84.21</td>
<td>&lt;</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness</td>
<td>36.05</td>
<td>35.95</td>
<td>36.05</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- AC showed a more erroneous perception of the spouse’s EPS 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.
- 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.
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Conclusions

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References