THE TAT AFFECTIVE SCALE: HOW MARITAL SATISFACTION RELATES TO INTERPERSONAL AFFECT

Monica Johnson and Sharon Rae Jenkins
University of North Texas, Denton, TX
Abstract

This study examines the relationship between the Thematic Apperception Test Affective Scale and marital satisfaction in a sample of community dwelling adults who were first studied as children in the early 1930s. We used TAT stories told in 1958 to predict marital satisfaction in 1970 and number of divorces by 1981. The TAT Affective Scale is a scoring system designed to measure the affect between characters. Past research has related the affective valence of spousal relationships in stories to marital satisfaction cross-sectionally; we studied it over time. We hypothesized that high scores on TAT Affect between spouses, relative to other relationships, will predict higher levels of marital satisfaction and fewer divorces.
Antoinette Thomas’s Affective Scale for the TAT

Originated from couples psychotherapy (Thomas & Dudek, 1985). This study found:

- Happier couples have higher positive levels of spousal affect than parent affect
- Less happy couples have a higher positive levels of parent affect than spousal affect
Hypotheses

- Hypothesis one is that the TAT Affective Scale net spousal score measured in 1958 will be positively correlated with a self-report rating of marital satisfaction in 1970.

- Hypothesis two is that the net spousal score will be positively correlated with marital adjustment rated by interviewer in 1970.

- Hypothesis three is that the net spousal score will be negatively correlated with the total number of divorces by 1981.
This study used data previously collected by the Institute of Human Development from two samples of children beginning in 1932, the Oakland Growth Study and the Berkeley Guidance Study (Elder, 1974). There was an 8 year age difference between the two groups. It should be noted that cohort effects may be shown because this sample of children lived through the Great Depression at a formative age.
Participants: Oakland Growth Study

- Participants N= 167 recruited from fifth and sixth grade in schools in Oakland, CA
- In 1932 age 10-12 years when initial measures began
- 92% Caucasian
- OGS sample included 5 waves of data collection during adult years, finishing in 1980-1981. These follow ups included interviews, health assessments, personality inventories, and fact-sheet questionnaires.
Participants: Berkeley Guidance Study

- Participants N=123 for this study, 54 men, 69 women
- In 1932 age 1.5 years when initial measures began
- 87% Caucasian and Protestant, and two-thirds came from middle-class families
- Divided into an intensely studied group to provide data on socioeconomic conditions and family patterns, and a “control” group.
- The present study’s data are from the three adult follow-ups (1959-60, 1969-70, & 1980-81).
Measures

- Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) Affective Scale
- OGS stories told to Murray using TAT pictures 1, 2, 3BM, 4, 6BM, & 12F
- BGS stories told to Murray using TAT pictures 1, 4, 6BM, 7BM, 3GF, and a picture of a man lying prone on a bed that was omitted from the final TAT set.
Antoinette Thomas’s Affective Scale classifies relationships among story characters by role (spouse, parent, non-spouse peer, and others) and the affect associated with each relationship on a four-point scale (-2 to +2) with 0 if relationship is not present.

The Affective score is based on the stimulus pull of the picture and the most frequent responses for each card, as well as the emotional content of the response (Thomas, 1985; 2008).

Scores are averaged for each role, and the average across roles subtracted from the spouse average.
Marital Satisfaction was measured by a self-rating scale in 1970.

In 1970, clinical interviews of several hours’ duration covered a variety of topics about participants’ current lives, including family relationships in detail. Interviewers also rated participants’ marital adjustment.

The 1981 follow-up included lifetime number of divorces (range 0-5).
Spouse affect in 1958 by itself is a significant predictor of interviewer-rated marital adjustment in 1970.

Men’s parent affect (but not net spouse affect) from 1958 is related to their self-rated marital satisfaction in 1970; not for women.

For men, Spouse affect is related negatively to parent affect; not so for women.
Berkeley Guidance Study Results

- Net spouse affect from 1958 relates to fewer divorces for men by 1981, but not for women.

- Men’s parent affect (but not net spouse affect) from 1958 is related to their self-rated marital satisfaction in 1970; not for women.

- Women’s non-spouse non-romantic affect is related to interviewer rated marital adjustment in 1970; but not for men.
Descriptive Analyses

- Number of divorces is negatively correlated with marital adjustment and marital satisfaction.

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**Discussion**

- Original hypotheses were supported for men and divorces, but not women or marital quality variables.
- Affect in specific relationships (but not net spouse affect relative to other relationships) was often consistent with theory.
- Sample differences in findings might reflect age cohort effects related to coming of age during the Great Depression (Oakland) vs. post-World War II (Berkeley Guidance) with very different gender and marriage role expectations.
Discussion

- Gender differences
  - In 1970 most participants were in their 40s with children in or approaching adulthood. At this point much marital satisfaction might come from being parents, but apparently more so for men who stories held more positive parent affect 12 years earlier.
  - Berkeley women who told more positive stories about non-romantic peers were rated as better adjusted in marriage 12 years later. This might reflect closeness to supportive peer social networks outside of marriage.
Discussion

- A community sample, not clinical, participated and the pictures used were not selected purposively.
- Relatively few told stories about married spouses (N= 53 of 123 for Berkeley; 70 did not).
- An unusual number of stories were short and descriptive rather than narratives with plots.
- Thus the findings presented here may be underestimates of what could be obtained with purposive picture selection, and examiner encouragement for longer stories.


Monica Johnson, Department of Psychology, College of Arts and Sciences
Sharon Rae Jenkins, Department of Psychology, College of Arts and Sciences
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