

Association of Character Strengths and Hope with Marital Satisfaction in Ethiopia

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Abstract

Introduction: Studies have claimed that character strengths and hopefulness are crucial for better marital functioning. However, few studies have examined the role of character strength and hope in marital satisfaction.

Objective: The present study aimed to investigate how character strengths and hope contribute to marital satisfaction among 386 participants.

Methods: A correlational study design was employed to investigate this phenomenon. Self-report data were collected using a questionnaire.

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to analyze the data. **Results:**

Findings showed that all character strengths (i.e., sacrifice, generosity, fairness, and admiration) and hope were positively correlated with marital satisfaction. The present study also revealed that two character strengths (fairness and admiration) and hope positively contribute to marital satisfaction. Practitioners interested in marriage and marital relationships may benefit from this study. The positive correlation between character strengths and hope in this study is in line with previous research. Moreover, supporting previous studies, the present study also revealed that character strengths such as fairness, admiration, and hopefulness positively predict marital satisfaction. **Conclusion:** The study concludes that character strengths and hope positively influence marital satisfaction. Limitations and future directions were also discussed.

Keywords: character, strengths, hope, marital satisfaction, generosity, admiration

Introduction

The success of both individuals and families in marital relationships mainly depends on marital satisfaction. It is believed that marital satisfaction relies on important character strengths related to marriage (Dew & Bradford Wilcox, 2013; Fincham & Beach, 2010). For instance, character strengths such as generosity, gratitude, optimism, sacrifice, humility, and forgiveness are linked to marital satisfaction (Dew & Bradford Wilcox, 2013; Goddard et al., 2016). These qualities enhance couples' ability to understand their partner and overcome their subjectivity. However, there have been limited studies that attempt to examine the role of character strengths such as admiration, fairness, generosity and sacrifice hope in relations to marital satisfaction (Dew & Bradford Wilcox, 2013; Ratri & Ratnasari, 2023; Veldorale-brogan et al., 2013). In particular, no study attempted to examine the role of character strengths and hope on marital satisfaction in the Ethiopian context (Addisu et al., 2017; John et al., 2019).

Marital satisfaction is crucial for a thriving marital life, which contributes to psychosocial well-being (Wilson & Novak, 2022). However, modern marriages have been faced with various stressful situations that are negatively associated with marital problems (Li & Wickrama, 2014). To address marital problems, recent studies have started to emphasize the factors that strengthen marital relationships (Kashdan et al., 2018). For instance, character strengths are identified as essential qualities in marital relationships, enabling partners to repair and sustain their marriage (Sanford et al., 2017). These qualities enhance couples' ability to understand their partner and overcome their subjectivity. Individuals with this quality can handle challenging situations and look for something positive in any circumstance they are in (Fowers, 2008). However, research exploring the role of character strengths and hope on marital relationships, particularly marital satisfaction, remains largely unexplored (Boiman-Meshita & Littman-Ovadia, 2021). Because, most previous studies on marital relationships focused on the factors leading to marital distress (Fincham & Beach, 2010; Skerrett & Fergus, 2015).

Therefore, this study aimed to investigate the contribution of character strengths and hope to marital satisfaction in Ethiopia. It was expected that the result of the present study would provide important empirical information for practitioners regarding what partners strengths and positive qualities contributes to marital satisfaction. This study can also contributes to behavioral and social science fields by addressing this gap in the literature by examining how these factors contributes to marital satisfaction.

Literature Review

Character strengths and marital relationship

The exercise of character strengths in marital relationships is crucial to enhancing individuals' conflict resolution ability (Lopez & Snyder, 2011). Because such qualities are relationship behaviors that enhance partners' ability to overcome

difficulties they experience in their lives (Sanford et al., 2017). For instance, factors such as forgiveness (Fincham & Beach, 2010) were linked with dyadic wellbeing. These strengths are also linked to success in communication and problem-solving (Dew & Bradford Wilcox, 2013). Character strengths refer to an individual's positive qualities and strengths that empower them to lead a fulfilling life (Fowers, 2008). The character strengths and hope that are the main focus of this study are highlighted as follows.

Generosity: The exercise of the character of generosity has been identified as a crucial quality that can foster harmonious relationships among partners (Dew & Bradford Wilcox, 2013). Generosity involves an individual's capacity to act kindly, be willing to forgive, and be ready to sacrifice for the sake of their marriage (Dew & Wilcox, 2011). This character can contribute to the flourishing of positive qualities such as kindness and nurturing among partners, leading to improved marital satisfaction. Some scholars have also highlighted the positive role of generosity on improving marital satisfaction and quality (Dew & Bradford Wilcox, 2013; Dew & Wilcox, 2011). The character of generosity nurtures partners' ability to understand each other's faults and interpret things from a positive point of view. It also contributes to a low level of marital conflict and a decreased likelihood of divorce (Dew & Bradford Wilcox, 2013).

Sacrifice: The virtue of sacrifice plays a crucial role in fostering trust and commitment among partners. This, in turn, contributes to the development of couples' sense of safety and security, which lays the foundation for marital satisfaction (Pippert et al., 2019). Couples' attitudes towards sacrifice have also been linked to positive marital outcomes. For instance, willingness to sacrifice has been linked to positive relationship behaviors such as communication, and conflict resolution. It also plays a crucial role in enhancing marital adjustment (Stanley et al., 2006).

Fairness: Scholars have emphasized the importance of fairness among couples in their marital life to maintain high marital quality. Due to the numerous challenges that couples encounter in their daily lives, the character of fairness is closely linked to marital satisfaction (Chong & Mickelson, 2016). The act of fairness is considered crucial for healthy marital relationships, contributing to marital happiness and marital stability (Hatfield et al., 2008).

Admiration: The significance of admiration in enhancing marital success is evident from partners recognizing the positive qualities of their partners (Hawkins et al., 2013). The practice of showing admiration in marital relationships fosters a friendly environment among couples. It fosters responsiveness between partners, which enhances marital quality (Peterson et al., 2014). Admiration, as one of the character strengths, has been linked to healthy marital relationships. It provides couples with the ability to deal with marital distress, including the transition to parenthood (Peterson et al., 2014).

Hope and Marital Satisfaction

Being hopeful in a marital relationship creates a conducive environment for couples to cope with adverse situations in marital life (Duggleby et al., 2011; Sanford et al., 2017). For example, a study showed that optimism enhances couples' perceived social support and their ability to solve problems cooperatively (Assad et al., 2007). Findings showed that the character of hope has been identified as a positive predictor of marital satisfaction (Sepehrian-Azar et al., 2016) and marriage quality (Sepehrian-Azar et al., 2016). Similarly, a study conducted among married students revealed that hope and happiness together explain 13% of the variance in marital satisfaction (Sepehrian-Azar et al., 2016).

Theoretical Framework

This study employed the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation theory (VSA) as a theoretical framework. The VSA theory suggests that individuals' responses to stressful situations depend on their characteristics, the nature of the stressor, and the availability of social support (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In the context of marital relationships, the VSA theory suggests that couples use various adaptive mechanisms to deal with the challenges they experience in a marriage. According to the VSA theory, character strengths are conceptualized as adaptive processes because they enhance individuals' ability to cope with challenges. Character strengths such as generosity, sacrifice, and admiration and hope would be conceptualized as an adaptive process because they enhance partners' ability to overcome marriage-related challenges. For instance, character strengths as an adaptive process have been linked to partners' ability to overcome marital problems (Peterson et al., 2014; Pippert et al., 2019). Similarly, hope is also identified as an adaptive quality to overcome marital challenges (Duggleby et al., 2011). Thus, we utilized the VSA theory to investigate the roles of character strengths as predictors of marital satisfaction.

The present study

This study aimed to examine the contribution of character strengths and hope to marital satisfaction. Despite some efforts, no studies have been conducted thus far to examine the relationship between character strengths, hope, and marital satisfaction. By addressing this research gap, this study may contribute to the existing knowledge. We expected that character strengths and hope would significantly contribute to marital satisfaction. Thus, this study aimed to address the following questions: (1) Are there significant inter-correlations among character strengths, hope, background data, and marital satisfaction? (2) To what extent do character strengths and hope predict marital satisfaction?

Methods

Samples

This study employed a correlational design to investigate the association among character strengths, hope, and marital satisfaction. A total of 386 randomly selected Addis Ababa city public servants have participated in this study. Participants must have been in a marital relationship for at least one year to be eligible for participation in the study. Of the total 386 samples, 210 (54.4%) were female, and 176 (45.6%) were male. The participants' average age and duration of marriage were 34 and 8 years, respectively. Regarding their education level, a college diploma was the minimum education level of participants in this study, with the majority of them (N=120, 31.1%) holding a B.A/BSc degree. In addition, the number of children per participant ranges from 0 to 5, with a monthly average income of 8439.48 ETB.

Procedures

The study received approval from the ethical approval committee of the School of Psychology at Addis Ababa University. Before administration, we translated the items originally written in English into Amharic with the help of language experts. Participants were assured that their information would be kept confidential. After being informed about the study, participants provided verbal informed consent to participate. Furthermore, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study if they felt uncomfortable. Data were gathered in collaboration with research assistants. To ensure the privacy of their information, participants were instructed to fill out the survey independently. Preliminary analyses were conducted to examine whether the data fulfilled the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity.

Measures

Marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was assessed using items adapted from the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMSS)(Schumm et al., 1986). KMSS consists of three globally worded and relatively homogeneous items. The measure is considered the most reliable indicator of marital satisfaction due to its consistent reliability across various studies(Graham et al., 2011). The items measure the extent to which the participants feel satisfied with their marriage. The scale is scored on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1= Extremely Dissatisfied to 7 = Extremely Satisfied. A sample item is: "How satisfied are you with your husband/wife as a partner?" The reported Cronbach's alpha was .95(Graham et al., 2011). The score ranges from 3 to 21, with higher scores indicating a higher level of marital satisfaction.

Character Strengths. Character strengths of the participants were assessed using items adapted from the Marital Virtue Profile (MVP)(Fawcett et al., 2013). It consists of 12 items and five dimensions. These dimensions include admiration (three items, e.g., "My partner appreciates all the work I do for our marriage"), sacrifice (three items, e.g., "I make personal sacrifices for the good of our marriage"), generosity (three items, e.g., "I can truly let go of negative feelings toward my partner"), and

fairness (two items, e.g., "I recognize when my partner feels that things are unfair in our relationship"). The reported internal consistency reliability for admiration, sacrifice, generosity, and fairness was .77, .74, .80, and .80, respectively. The overall reported internal consistency reliability for MVP was 0.76. This scale is scored on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0=Never to 3=Always. The internal consistency reliability of the present study was 0.85. Higher scores correspond with greater character strengths.

Hope. Participants' level of hope in their marriage was assessed using four items adapted from the Relationship Hope Scale (RHS)(Erickson, 2015). The RHS demonstrates good construct validity. Items assess the participant's sense of hope in maintaining their marital relationship despite various challenges. The scale is scored on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 0=Never to 3=Always. An example item is: "I believe our marriage can survive the challenges that life throws at us." The reported internal consistency reliability was 0.94. High scores represent a high level of relationship hope.

Control Variables. Due to our expectation that some background variables might impact the relationship with outcome variables, we included age, gender, age at marriage, duration of marriage, level of education, number of children, and monthly income level as control variables.

Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlation, and hierarchical multiple regression analysis. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to examine the relationship between independent variables (i.e., character strengths, hope, and background variables) and dependent variables (i.e., marital satisfaction). Finally, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to investigate the contributions of character strengths and hope to marital satisfaction, while controlling for background variables. SPSS 26 is statistical software used for data analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed the ethical guidelines set by Addis Ababa University. Before the researchers could access the participants, ethical clearance was obtained on June 23, 2023, from the ethical approval committee of the School of Psychology at Addis Ababa University. This ethical clearance included information about the study, ensuring voluntary participation, obtaining informed consent, ensuring participants' freedom to withdraw from the research at any time, and treating the collected data and participants' identities with confidentiality. To address the above ethical issues, we obtained ethical clearance from the Ethical Approval Committee of the School of Psychology at Addis Ababa University. Based on the ethical clearance, participants were informed about the study and provided their written consent to participate. Participants were also given the option to withdraw from the study at any time

without facing any negative consequences. Their privacy and confidentiality were maintained by not revealing their identity during data analysis.

Results

Correlational Analysis

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and inter-correlations among variables. The study found a positive correlation between the participants' marital satisfaction and hope ($r = .43$, $p < 0.01$), sacrifice ($r = .33$, $p < 0.01$), fairness ($r = .43$, $p < 0.01$), generosity ($r = .39$, $p < 0.01$), admiration ($r = .33$, $p < 0.01$), age ($r = .12$, $p < 0.05$), marital duration ($r = .20$, $p < 0.01$), and number of children ($r = .21$, $p < 0.01$). Moreover, the level of hope among participants was positively correlated with character strengths such as sacrifice ($r = .47$, $p < 0.01$), fairness ($r = .46$, $p < 0.01$), generosity ($r = .44$, $p < 0.01$), and admiration ($r = .43$, $p < 0.01$). Lastly, background variables such as age, marital duration, and number of children were positively related to hope and certain character strengths. There were varying levels of inter-correlations among these variables, ranging from fairly substantial to high levels.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlation for all Variables (N=386)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1.Age	-											
2. Sex	-.20**	-										
3. Education level	.04	-.15**	-									
4. Marital duration	.80**	.04	-.06	-								
5. Number of children	.64**	.00	-.05	.73**	-							
6. Income level	.23**	-.23**	.31**	.09	.09	-						
7. Hope	.13**	-.03	.09	.18**	.14**	.02	-					
8.Sacrifice	.15**	-.11*	.08	.11*	.04	.06	.47**	-				
9. Fairness	.13**	.06	.05	.21**	.18**	.08	.46**	.30**	-			
10. Generosity	.09	.05	.02	.15**	.06	-.015	.44**	.41**	.49**	-		
11. Admiration	.05	.05	-.04	.13**	.03	-.03	.43**	.35**	.32**	.41**	-	
12. Marital satisfaction	.12*	.09	-.04	.20**	.21**	-.05	.43**	.33**	.43**	.39**	.33**	-
M	35.02	-	3.63	9.95	2.20	8181.13	9.84	7.27	4.88	6.88	5.00	18.37
SD	6.46	-	1.48	5.65	1.02	596.030	1.85	1.52	1.26	1.77	1.11	3.01

Note:For sex, 2= female, 1=male; M=mean; SD=Standard Deviation; duration of marriage =number of years individuals has stayed in marriage; * $p < 0.05$ (2-tailed), ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed)

Hierarchical Regression Analyses

To examine the contribution of character strengths and hope to marital satisfaction, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted after controlling for background variables. In this process, background variables (age, sex, marital duration, education level, number of children, and income level) were entered in Step 1, which explains 6.6% of the variance in marital satisfaction. None of these control variables were significant predictors of marital satisfaction. When character strengths (sacrifice, fairness, generosity, and admiration) and hope entered at Step 2, the model explained 30% of the overall variance ($F(11, 277) = 10.809, p < .00$). Character strengths (sacrifice, fairness, generosity, and admiration) and hope explained an additional 23.5% of the variance in marital satisfaction after controlling for background variables ($\Delta R^2 = .235, F \text{ change } (5, 277) = 18.589, p < .00$). As shown in Table 2, Model 2, only three variables were statistically significant: hope had the highest beta coefficient ($\beta = .193, p < 0.00$), followed by fairness ($\beta = .172, p < 0.00$), and finally admiration ($\beta = .138, p < 0.05$). Table 2 presents a summary of coefficients from a hierarchical multiple regression analysis of character strengths and hope on marital satisfaction, while controlling for background variables.

Table 2

Hierarchical Multiple Regression of character strengths and hope on Marital Satisfaction after Controlling for Background Variables

Predictor	B	SE B	β
Step 1			
Age	.012	.044	.030
Sex	.318	.375	.054
Education level	.043	.116	.022
Marital duration	.083	.052	.192
Number of children	.099	.202	.042
income	-2.135E-5	.000	-.053
Step 2			
Age	.035	.039	.086
Sex	.373	.332	.063
Education level	-.049	.103	-.026

Marital duration	.003	.047	.006
Number of children	.187	.178	.080
income	-3.441E-5	.000	-.085
Hope	.322	.106	.193**
Sacrifice	.155	.119	.079
fairness	.402	.142	.172**
Generosity	.195	.104	.119
Admiration	.340	.144	.138*

Note. $R^2 = .066$ (Adjusted $R^2 = .046$) for Step 1; $R^2 = .300$ (Adjusted $R^2 = .273$) for Step 2; $\Delta R^2 = .235$; ($p < 0.00$); * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$

Discussion

The objective of this study was to examine the contribution of hope and character strengths to marital satisfaction. Our findings reveal that background variables such as age, number of children, and marital duration were positively associated with marital satisfaction. In contrast to this study, previous research has indicated that younger participants tend to report higher levels of marital satisfaction than their older counterparts (Addisu et al., 2017). This contradiction may occur due to variations related to contexts such as cultural differences and time. Regarding the relationship between the number of children and marital satisfaction, the previous study contrasts with the findings of the present study, which revealed a negative association between the number of children and marital satisfaction (Addisu et al., 2017). This inconsistency might be attributed to the better economic status of the current study participants. Being employed in government institutions enables them to provide their children with basic needs. Moreover, due to their collectivist culture, participants in the present study may prefer to have more children (Onyishi et al., 2012). Besides, in contrast to the present study, scholars have identified a negative correlation between the duration of marriage and marital satisfaction (Lee & McKinnish, 2018). This contradiction arises because the increasing duration of marriage is often associated with high social values, such as having children and gaining social acceptance, which in turn leads to the expectation of respecting one's marriage. This, in turn, increases the partner's level of marital satisfaction as they spend more time together in their marriage.

Supporting the present study, previous research has shown a positive correlation between hope and marital satisfaction (Ruch et al., 2010). A strong sense of hope and optimism about one's marriage is associated with a better ability to cope with various marital challenges, leading to higher levels of marital satisfaction (Ruch et al., 2010). Moreover, our study found a positive correlation between marital satisfaction and character strengths (e.g., sacrifice, fairness, generosity, and admiration). In line with the current study, scholars have also found positive

associations between marital satisfaction and sacrifice(Veldorale-brogan et al., 2013), fairness(Ratri & Ratnasari, 2023; Ruch et al., 2010), generosity(Dew & Bradford Wilcox, 2013), and admiration(Chen & Li, 2007). It has been documented that character strengths, such as generosity and sacrifice, create conducive conditions that promote positive marital relationships. Besides, the expressions of admiration(Chen & Li, 2007) and fairness(Veldorale-brogan et al., 2013) were also documented as crucial qualities in marital relationships.

To address our second research question, we found that two character strengths, namely fairness, and admiration, along with hope, positively predict marital satisfaction. Confirming the findings of the present study, the researcher also identified the positive impact of hope on enhancing marital satisfaction(Sepehrian-Azar et al., 2016). Hope and optimism not only contribute to marital satisfaction but also enhance one's ability to seek social support and solve problems(Assad et al., 2007). Studies have also linked hope to the adaptability of marital problems and individuals' efforts to resolve them(Sanford et al., 2017). Moreover, due to the positive contribution of hopefulness on marital satisfaction, the findings of this study are also in line with VSA theory(Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Supporting the VSA theory, being hopeful has been linked to one's adaptability to marital challenges(Sanford et al., 2017).

The present study demonstrated the positive contribution of fairness and admiration as character strengths in predicting marital satisfaction. In line with this finding, previous studies have also discussed fairness as an important contributing factor that enhances marital satisfaction(Chong & Mickelson, 2016; Ratri & Ratnasari, 2023). Character strengths, including fairness, have also been discussed as crucial ingredients for better marital communication(Veldorale-brogan et al., 2013). Furthermore, scholars have identified that admiration contributes to the quality of marital relationships(Kashdan et al., 2018; Peterson et al., 2014). Admiration, as a character strength, helps partners cope with marital distress(Peterson et al., 2014). The role of fairness and admiration as character strengths on marital satisfaction in this study also supports the assumptions of VSA theory(Pareek & Jain, 2018).

Limitations and Future Directions

This study's reliance on self-report data is one of the limitations that future studies should address by employing various data collection techniques. The cross-sectional nature of this study presents another limitation, as it hinders us from drawing conclusions about the directionality of the study results. As a result, future studies with longitudinal data would be required to address this limitation.

Implications

This study offers practical and theoretical applications to a wider global context. The influence of character strengths and hope on marital relationships can explain their applicability to marital satisfaction worldwide. Due to inevitable challenges in marital relationships, these qualities are relevant across cultures as they

foster important marriage maintenance behaviors. Given the roles of both social workers and counselors in addressing different marital issue; the present study benefits these professionals in promoting healthy marital relationship. Practitioners, such as counselors and social workers, could gain valuable insights into the benefits of implementing strength-based intervention programs for their clients. Due to the positive impact of character strengths on marital relationships, social workers and counselors can utilize this study promote the skills of being generous, admiring and behaving in fair manner among partners. Moreover, social workers and counselors can utilize this study to improve their clients'skills of remaining hopeful in difficult situations. Moreover, policymakers may also benefit from these findings. Additionally, this study also be relevant to policymakers who are working on family matters.

Conclusion

Researchers have shown important factors that are associated with marital satisfaction. However, studies examining character strengths and hope in relation to marital satisfaction are scarce. We used cross-sectional data to address these gaps. The result of this study shows that character strengths and hope play a crucial role in enhancing marital satisfaction. These qualities provide partners with the ability to overcome challenges they may face in their marriage. By enhancing partners' character strengths and hope, their marital relationship can be improved and maintained. This study has important implications for practitioners interested in marriage and couple counseling.

Recommendations

- Practitioners including counselors and social workers should design strength-based intervention programs in which partners can be trained and guided.
- Counselors and social workers are suggested to work on enhancing the skills of hope and optimism in addressing a wide range of family issues, including marital relationships.
- Couples should be trained on how to develop the habit of being fair, willing to sacrifice, admiring each other, and behaving generously towards each other because these can help to create a positive environment in marital relationships, which ultimately contributes to marital satisfaction.

Acknowledgments

We wish to acknowledge all participants involved in the study. We also express our appreciation to Addis Ababa city principals who collaborated on this study.

Conflict of interest

There is no any conflict of interest to declare.

Funding

No funds, grants, or other support was received.

Financial interests

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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