Partner Discrepancies and Age Differences in Marital Quality: Distinguishing the Ideal, Expected, and Perceived Partner

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Objectives. Previous studies have observed a rebound of marital quality in later adulthood. This study tested whether partner discrepancy was a mediator of the age differences in marital quality.

Method. The present study assessed partner discrepancies and marital quality in 56 couples, 20–79 years old. Two levels of partner standards (ideal and expected standards) and 2 domains of partner characteristics (personality and support) were examined.

Results. Husbands’ partner discrepancies, but not wives’, were found to mediate the curvilinear age differences in marital quality.

Discussion. Consistent with the life-span theory of control, the results suggest that adjusting cognition about the partner is essential to the typically higher marital quality in later adulthood. The results also suggest that the level of comparison standards and the specific domain of partner characteristics should be considered in future studies.

Key Words: Age differences—Marital quality—Marital standards—Partner discrepancy—Personality—Support.

In the marriage literature, previous studies have revealed that marital quality increased from middle adulthood to later adulthood (e.g., Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993). Meanwhile, in the aging literature, both theories and empirical findings have argued that people increase the use of secondary control and accommodative coping in later adulthood (Brandstätter & Rothermund, 2002; Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996). One type of secondary control and accommodative coping is to lower the discrepancy between what people desire and what they have achieved (Cheng, 2004). This study aimed at integrating the two literatures by testing whether partner discrepancy was a mediator of age differences in marital quality.

Partner Discrepancy and Age Differences in Marital Quality

One well-established finding in the marriage literature is that marital quality changes across adulthood following a U-shaped curve. Whereas middle-aged couples report relatively lower marital quality, both newlyweds and older couples report relatively higher marital quality (e.g., Glenn, 1990; Henry, Berg, Smith, & Florsheim, 2007; Kurdek, 2005). In particular, compared with middle-aged couples, older couples were found to interact with each other with a more positive pattern during both collaboration and conflict (Smith et al., 2009) and to think about the couple as a whole rather than as separate partners (Seider, Hirschberger, Nelson, & Levenson, 2009).

As the discrepancy between what people desire and what they have achieved in reality plays an important role in determining happiness and satisfaction (for a review, see Michalos, 1986), we expected partner discrepancy, that is, the discrepancy between “the partner one desires” and “the partner one actually marries” to mediate age differences in marital quality. It has already been found that the cognition about close relationships, including the expectation and evaluation of the partner, plays an essential role in determining relationship quality (Baumol, Epstein, Sayers, & Sher, 1989). Moreover, secondary control and accommodative coping strategies are more frequently used in later adulthood (Brandstätter & Rothermund, 2002; Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996). In particular, adjusting expectancy and positive reappraisal of the current situation are two typical compensatory strategies utilized by older adults. For example, Ryff (1991) found that older adults generally reported lower ideal and future self-expectancy compared with middle-aged and young adults. Brandstätter and Renner (1990) also reported that age was positively related to “flexible goal adjustment” but negatively related to “tenacious goal pursuit.” Moreover, older adults were found to be better at using positive reappraisal to regulate emotion while watching negative films than young adults (Shiota & Levenson, 2009). As both adjusting expectancy and positive reappraisal of the current situation can reduce the discrepancy between goal and reality, one possible explanation to the rebound of marital quality in later adulthood is that older adults can manage to have a small partner discrepancy.
Findings from previous studies have already revealed the negative association between partner discrepancy and marital quality (e.g., Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). Irrational beliefs or extremely high expectations about the relationship can hamper relationship quality and stability (e.g., Kohn & Sayers, 2005). Moreover, Fletcher and Simpson (2000) proposed the Ideal Standards Model and suggested that ideal standards about the partner served three important functions (i.e., evaluation, explanation, and regulation) in romantic relationships, thus were strongly influential on relationship quality. Goal discrepancy has also been found to mediate age differences in general well-being (Cheng, 2004). This study extended this line of research to marriage and examined age differences in partner discrepancy and the potential mediation role of partner discrepancy in the association between age and marital quality. Moreover, we distinguished between two levels of partner standards (i.e., ideal vs. expected standards).

Different Comparison Standards of Partner Discrepancy

Most previous studies about partner discrepancy only included one level of comparison standard. For example, Fletcher and colleagues (2000) used the ideal partner as the comparison standard, whereas Kelley and Burgoon (1991) used expectancy about the partner. Although as far as we know, no study has examined the effects of different partner discrepancies on age-related marital quality, the issue about multiple comparison standards has already been noticed in other research fields. Michalos (1986) suggested that different “gap theories” about satisfaction and happiness adopted different standards with which to compare reality. The discrepancies from different comparison standards affect satisfaction and happiness in different ways (Michalos, 1980). Higgins’s (1987) self-discrepancy theory proposed two comparison standards for the actual self: the ideal self and the ought self. Discrepancies from the two standards would lead to differential emotional outcomes.

In view of these findings, the current study assessed two levels of comparison standards, the ideal partner and the expected partner, together with perception of the actual partner. Hence, the ideal–perceived partner discrepancy and the expected–perceived partner discrepancy could both be calculated and examined. The ideal partner standard is about people’s requirements of the perfect partner without considering any constraints in reality, whereas the expected partner standard is about people’s realistic requirements of their partner, which they do expect the actual partner to meet.

The Current Study

The current study aimed to test whether partner discrepancy could mediate age differences in marital quality across adulthood. Two levels of partner standards (i.e., ideal and expected standards) were assessed. In addition, as both available support from the partner and the partner’s personality are important factors influencing marital quality (e.g., Dehle, Larsen, & Landers, 2001; Luo & Klohnen, 2005), we examined partner discrepancies in these two domains. This resulted in four different partner discrepancies: ideal–perceived partner personality discrepancy, expected–perceived partner personality discrepancy, ideal–perceived partner support discrepancy, and expected–perceived partner support discrepancy. The main hypothesis is that age differences in partner discrepancies could mediate the U-shaped pattern of marital quality across adulthood.

Method

Participants

Fifty-six couples were recruited from the community of Hong Kong, China. The husbands’ age varied from 21 to 79 years old (M = 52.06, SD = 14.88), whereas the wives’ age varied from 20 to 74 years old (M = 48.38, SD = 14.12). Within each couple, the age difference between the husband and wife was no more than 10 years. More information about the sample can be found in the Supplementary Table.

Measures and Procedure

The current study was approved by the Survey and Behavioral Research Ethics Committee of the Chinese University of Hong Kong. First, we obtained informed consent from the participants. Then, the couple completed the questionnaire either simultaneously in separate rooms or one after the other without the spouse’s presence.

Marital quality.—Marital satisfaction was measured by the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm et al., 1986; Yip & Fung, 2005). The scale includes three 10-point items asking about the general satisfaction with the marriage and the spouse right now from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 10 (extremely satisfied), Cronbach’s α = .94. Trust toward the partner was measured by the Trust Scale of Rempel, Holmes, and Zanna (1985), which contains 17 seven-point items (Cronbach’s α = .89). We recoded the items when necessary to ensure that a higher score indicated a higher level of trust. Lastly, closeness was measured by the seven-point single-item pictorial measure, the Inclusion of Other in the Self Scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), with a higher score indicating a higher level of closeness. A composite score of marital quality was calculated as the sum of participants’ z-scores of marital satisfaction, trust, and closeness.

Ideal, expected, and perceived personality of the partner.—The short version of the Big Five Inventory, which has 11 items assessing the five personality traits, was adapted for the current study (Rammstedt & John, 2007).
Participants were asked to rate each item from three perspectives: (a) “Without any real-life constraint, I would ideally like my partner to be someone who . . . .” (b) “In real life, I expect my partner to be someone who . . . .” and (c) “My partner is actually someone who . . . .” All answers were indicated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The ideal–perceived discrepancy (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .83 \)) and expected–perceived discrepancy (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .83 \)) of partner’s personality were calculated as the absolute difference between the two corresponding ratings. Then the average partner personality discrepancies across the 11 items were calculated.

**Ideal, expected, and perceived support from the partner—**

Two previous partner support scales were adapted for the current study, nine items from the measure of Yeung, Fung, and Lang (2007) and the other nine items from the Measure of Expectations for Partner of McNulty and Karney (2004). For each item, participants were asked to rate how much (a) they would ideally like their partner to perform the behavior without considering any real-life constraint, (b) they expected their partner to perform the behavior in real life, and (c) their partner actually performed the behavior. All ratings were made on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 7 (always). The absolute differences between the two corresponding ratings were calculated for ideal–perceived support discrepancy (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .89 \)) and expected–perceived support discrepancy (Cronbach’s \( \alpha = .89 \)). Then the average partner support discrepancies across the 18 items were calculated.

Next, demographic information was collected for each participant, including own age and partner’s age, sex, marriage duration, number of children, religion, education level, and monthly family income. Participants also rated their current health status. None of these variables significantly correlated with marital quality and thus were not included in subsequent analyses. Finally, participants were orally debriefed about the purpose of the study.

**Results**

We followed the method of Baron and Kenny (1986) to test the mediation role of partner discrepancies. First, we tested whether the mediator (i.e., partner discrepancies) was significantly related to the dependent variable (i.e., marital quality). To account for the interdependence between husbands’ and wives’ data, two Actor–Partner Interdependence Models (Kenny, Cook, & Kashy, 2006) were tested using the EQS program (Bentler, 1989), one for partner personality discrepancies (Model A in Figure 1) and the other for partner support discrepancies (Model B in Figure 1).

The goodness of fit of Model A was good, \( \chi^2(1) = 0.05 \), not significant (ns), comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.00, normed fit index (NFI) = 1.00, root mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) < 0.001. Among the eight paths from partner personality discrepancies to marital quality, husbands’ marital quality was significantly predicted only by husbands’ own ideal–perceived partner personality discrepancy, \( \beta = .38, p = .020 \). However, wives’ marital quality was significantly predicted by both wives’ and husbands’ ideal–perceived partner personality discrepancy (\( \beta = -.32, p = .033; \beta = -.39, p = .024 \)).

The goodness of fit of Model B was also good, \( \chi^2(1) = 0.85 \), ns, CFI = 1.00, NFI = 0.99, RMSEA < 0.001. Husbands’ marital quality was significantly predicted only by husbands’ own expected–perceived partner support discrepancy, \( \beta = -.35, p = .013 \), whereas wives’ marital quality was predicted only by wives’ own ideal–perceived partner support discrepancy, \( \beta = -.58, p < .001 \).

Then, we examined whether the independent variable (i.e., the square of age) was significantly related to marital quality (dependent variable) and partner discrepancies (mediator) respectively. First, marital quality was regressed on standardized age square in husbands and wives, respectively, controlling for standardized age. The standardized age square was significant in explaining the variance of husbands’ marital quality, \( \beta = .29, p = .034 \) (see Model 1 in Table 1), but not wives’, \( \beta = .21, \) ns. The results suggested that age differences in husbands’ marital quality followed the U-shaped pattern but not in wives’.

Next, husbands’ ideal–perceived partner personality discrepancy and expected–perceived partner support discrepancy were regressed on standardized age square, controlling for standardized age. Standardized age square was a significant predictor of husbands’ ideal–perceived partner personality discrepancy, \( \beta = -.27, p = .042 \), as well as husbands’ expected–perceived partner support discrepancy, \( \beta = -.44, p = .001 \), suggesting curvilinear age differences in the two partner discrepancies. We also regressed wives’ ideal–perceived partner personality discrepancy and ideal–perceived partner support discrepancy on standardized age square and standardized age. None of these effects were significant, \( ps > .13 \), indicating no age differences in wives’ partner discrepancies.

As the curvilinear age differences in marital quality and partner discrepancies were only found in husbands, we only tested whether partner discrepancies could account for age differences in marital quality in husbands. In addition to standardized age and standardized age square, we entered either husbands’ ideal–perceived partner personality discrepancy or expected–perceived support discrepancy into the regression models (see Models 2 and 3 in Table 1). Both partner discrepancies could eliminate the significant effect of standardized age square on marital quality.

Finally, we tested the two mediation model by the bootstrapping method (Preacher & Hayes, 2004). The 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect through husbands’ ideal–perceived partner personality discrepancy was 0.07–0.90 and that of the indirect effect through husbands’ expected–perceived partner support discrepancy was 0.06–0.86. Both intervals did not cover zero, suggesting that both indirect effects were significant at the .05 level.
DISCUSSION

This is the first study examining how age differences in partner discrepancies, with different comparison standards (ideal vs. expected standards) and in different domains (support vs. personality), affect marital quality. We found that husbands’ ideal–perceived partner personality discrepancy and expected–perceived partner support discrepancy significantly mediated the U-shaped age differences in their marital quality. Both ideal–perceived partner personality discrepancy and expected–perceived partner support discrepancy were the largest in middle-aged husbands and were smaller in older husbands. These results support the life-span

Table 1. Multiple Regressions of Husbands’ Marital Quality on Standardized Age, Standardized Age Square, and Relevant Husbands’ Partner Discrepancies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
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<td>B</td>
<td>SE (B)</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>SE (B)</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>B</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>−0.78</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>0.83</td>
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<tr>
<td>Z_age</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z_age²</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.29*</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H_I–P PerDis</td>
<td>−1.55</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>−47***</td>
<td>−1.54</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>−31*</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>H_E–P SupDis</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>.12</td>
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<td></td>
<td>.32</td>
<td></td>
<td>.19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F for R² change</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>14.51***</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.27*</td>
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Notes. Z_age = standardized age, Z_age² = standardized age square, H_I–P PerDis = husbands’ ideal–perceived partner personality discrepancy, H_E–P SupDis = husbands’ expected–perceived partner support discrepancy, B = unstandardized coefficient, β = standardized coefficient. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
theory of control in the marital context. Older husbands might utilize secondary control (Schulz & Heckhausen, 1996) or accommodative strategies (Brandstätter & Rothermund, 2002) to change their cognition about the partner and perceive smaller discrepancies between the actual partner and the desired partner. As a result, husbands’ marital quality appears to rebound in later adulthood. However, no age differences were found in the ideal–perceived partner personality discrepancy or the ideal–perceived partner support discrepancy among wives. Perhaps as a result of this, no age differences were found in wives’ marital quality in our sample either. The results suggest potential gender differences in the life-span change of control strategies, which is a promising direction for future studies.

Moreover, our findings suggested that the ideal–perceived partner discrepancies were more closely related to marital quality than were the expected–perceived partner discrepancies, which is consistent with Michalos’ (1980) view that the aspiration–achievement gap is a stronger predictor of satisfaction than the expectation–achievement gap. The expected partner standard is about the basic requirements. It is possible that even when the partner meets these requirements, it may not add much to marital quality.

The only exception where the expected–perceived partner discrepancies outperformed the ideal–perceived partner discrepancies in predicting marital quality was husbands’ partner support discrepancies. Although husbands stick to the ideal standards about partner personality, they are more realistic when evaluating partner’s support. They may be satisfied as long as the partner’s support meets their realistic expectations. However, wives consistently emphasize the ideal–perceived partner discrepancies, suggesting that wives may be more idealistic than husbands when evaluating their partner.

We acknowledge several limitations of the study. First, the age differences found were based on cross-sectional data. It is possible that part of the age differences reflects cohort or attrition effects. Moreover, the effects we examined were correlational. No conclusion about cause and effect can be drawn. Second, age and marital duration were highly correlated in our sample, $r = .934$, $p < .001$. It is difficult to distinguish the effects of the two variables. Third, because we used difference scores to indicate partner discrepancies, we could not examine the effect of the mean level of partner standards. It is possible that partner discrepancy at the top end of the spectrum (e.g., high standards and high performance) and that at the low end of the spectrum (e.g., low standards and low performance) might affect marital quality differently. Fourth, we only examined marital quality as the marital outcome. Adapting Higgins’ (1987) self-discrepancy theory, it is possible that the ideal–perceived partner discrepancy and the expected–perceived partner discrepancy are differentially related to other marital outcomes. Future studies can address these issues by alternative study designs.

In conclusion, the current study identified partner discrepancies to be a significant mediator of the curvilinear age differences in marital quality, highlighting the role of compensatory cognition in marital relationship across adulthood. The study also found that people tended to emphasize different partner discrepancies in different marital domains, suggesting that partner discrepancies need to be defined more clearly in future studies.

**Supplementary Material**

Supplementary material can be found at: http://psychsocgerontology.oxfordjournals.org/

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**References**


