Positive Facial Expressions in Marriage: Genuine and Non-Genuine Smiles as Predictors of Marital Satisfaction

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BACKGROUND

• Marital emotional functioning is an important predictor of marital satisfaction [1]
• Positive emotions play an important role in social relationships [2], but few studies have examined positive emotions in marriage

The Present Study

• Examined an aspect of positive marital emotional functioning via displays of positive facial expressions (i.e., genuine and nongenuine smiles) during marital interactions and their associations with marital satisfaction
• Hypothesized positive association between genuine (but not non-genuine) smiles and marital satisfaction

METHOD

Participants
• N = 66 married spouses from Chicago area from highly diverse backgrounds
• Age: M = 42.77, SD = 9.3
• Household income: M = $72.5K, SD = $<27.5K, range: <20K to >150K (n=8)
• Education (in years): M = 15.08, SD = 2.79

Measures and Procedure
• Smiles were measured as spouses engaged in unrehearsed 10-minute conversations about (1) a pleasant topic (i.e., positive conversation) and (2) a topic of disagreement (i.e., conflict conversation) (in counterbalanced order)
• Amusement experience was measured after each conversation using an emotion checklist (i.e., 0 = no amusement at all; 8 = strongest amusement ever felt)
• Marital satisfaction was measured using the Marital Adjustment Test (i.e., 15 items, α = .8; e.g., “To what extent do you and your mate agree or disagree on demonstration of affection?”)

RESULTS

Genuine and Non-Genuine Smiles Coding

• Two trained coders objectively coded genuine and non-genuine smiles based on the Facial Action Coding System (κ = .93-1) on a second-by-second basis for the first 3-minutes of each conversation.
• Genuine smile was defined as contraction of (1) action unit (AU) 6 (i.e., cheek raiser) and (2) AU 12 (i.e., lip corner raise).
• Non-genuine smile was defined as contraction of only AU 12
• To take into account that smiles were coded during a conversation, we included two covariate codes: (1) talking and (2) laughing.

Preliminary Analyses

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Note. *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001.

• Results indicated no significant correlations (r < .10, p < .05) between smiles (genuine and non-genuine) and marital satisfaction, regardless of conversation context. Results held controlling for talking and laughing.

DISCUSSION

• Findings do not support link between smiles during marital conversations and marital satisfaction
• Exploratory analyses support positive link between smiles (in particular genuine smiles) and positive emotional experiences during marital conversations
• Study has limitations, which suggest directions for future research, including increasing sample size to afford sufficient statistical power to detect medium-sized effects; expanding smiles coding to capture >2 action units for >3 minutes; and accounting for statistical interdependence between spouses
• Findings guide us in continuing to examine how positive emotional expressions fit into the larger body of positive emotion research

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REFERENCES