



# Roles of personality, age at marriage and length of marriage in marital satisfaction in a Nigerian sample

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## ABSTRACT

This study investigated personality traits, age at marriage and length of marriage as predictors of marital satisfaction in a sample of Nigerians. Two hundred and two (202) married adults, comprising 134 females and 68 males participated in the study. Two instruments were used to collect data: Big Five Inventory (BFI), and Index of Marital Satisfaction (IMS). Hierarchical multiple regression was used to analyse the data. Result showed that two personality traits (conscientiousness and neuroticism) significantly predicted marital satisfaction - neuroticism negatively predicted marital satisfaction while conscientiousness positively predicted marital satisfaction. The result of the findings was discussed as well as the implications and limitation of the study were discussed and suggestions for further studies were highlighted.

## Introduction

Marriage is a social union or legal contract between two people. Marriage is basically the union of two biologically unrelated persons of opposite sex as sanctioned by society for marital coexistence for life fulfilling purposes (Oki, 2005). It is an institution in which interpersonal relationships are intimately acknowledged and expressed. Marriage is one of the universal social institutions established to control and regulate the life of mankind. It is an institution with different implications in different cultures. In many societies, marriage is considered the best way to ensure orderly raising of children. Ideally, it offers intimacy, commitment, friendship, affection, sexual fulfillment, companionship and opportunity for emotional growth as well as a new source of identity and self-esteem. Marriage is a vital social institution which regulates interpersonal relationship and sexual relationship and nearly 90% of all individuals marry at least once in their lifetime (Cherlin, 2004). Gottman (1994), observed that what is critical in a marriage is a balance between the couple's positive and negative interactions that determines their satisfaction. This can be taken as an indication of the value placed on the marital union.

However, the rate at which marriages dissolve was 3.7 per 1, 000 in April of 2009 (Centre for Disease Control, CDC, 2009). The rate of marital dissolution is affected by levels of marital satisfaction and happiness within the marriage. Marriage institution has been known as a lifelong commitment between two partners with happiness, support and peaceful coexistence between couples. But marriage institution in recent times is experiencing a steady increase in failure to withstand. Some marriages are characterized with conflicts between couples, domestic battering, strife- ridden homes etc. There is now an increase in number of divorce and single parents, people even choose to cohabit instead of marrying in the society. Human beings value marriage, and the value is only retained if the marriage is a happy and functional one. A successful marriage could be defined based on several factors: marriage stability, joy and marital satisfaction. It is stated that marital satisfaction is one of the main significant factors that influence the quality and stability of marriage. Marital satisfaction

could be defined as a subjective spouse's assessment of the quality of marriage. It is thought that marital satisfaction is significant not only for the quality and stability of the marriage, but also for the spouse's interpersonal interactions with each other. Marital satisfaction may be the most important issue in marital life which may have the highest effect on the stability and failure of couples' lives.

Marital satisfactory is the major component of a healthy family (Rostami, Ghazinour, Nygren, & Richter, 2014). Kaplan and Maddux (2002) defined marital satisfaction as an individual's experience in marriage which can be evaluated by each person in response to the degree of marital pleasure. Kaplan and Maddux (2002) posited that it depends upon the individual's expectations, needs and desires in their marriage. Marital satisfaction on the other hand could refer to the degree of satisfaction between husband and wife as married persons. It means good feeling concerning one's marriage. Schoen (2002), indicated that marital satisfaction is a global evaluation of the state of one's marriage and a reflection of marital happiness and functioning. From the evolutionary perspective, marital satisfaction can be viewed as a psychological state of regulated mechanism that monitor the benefits and costs of marriage to a person (Shackelford & Buss, 2000).

Gelles (1995) defined marital satisfaction as an individual's subjective evaluation of overall nature of marriage. The definition reflects the degree to which an individual's expectations towards marriage are reflected in his or her own marriage. From the definitions, it can be deduced that marital satisfaction is a subjective evaluation that marital relationship is good, satisfying, happy or successful. Marital satisfaction can generally refer to being content and happy within one's marriage. For many people, marital satisfaction has become a yardstick for measuring the success and stability of marriage, personal fulfillment and wellbeing. Marital satisfaction is often viewed as an individual's interpretation of the overall quality of the marriage or the person's happiness with the marriage. Marital satisfaction is a mental state that reflects the perceived benefits and cost of marriage to a person.

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The more costs a marriage partner inflicts on the spouse, the less satisfied the spouse generally is with the marriage and with the marriage partner. Similarly, the greater the perceived benefits are, the more satisfied a spouse is with the marriage and with the marriage partner (Schoen, 2002).

Stone and Shackelford (2007) identified some components and mechanisms of marital satisfaction which includes: pattern interaction, spousal support, and physical violence.

*Pattern of interaction:* Patterns of interaction between spouses can affect how satisfied they are with their marriage. The pattern most often related to marital dissatisfaction is one of demand withdrawal. In this pattern, one partner criticizes or nags the other partner about change, while the other partner evades the confrontation and discussion.

*Spousal support:* Another component of satisfaction within marriage according to Stone and Shackelford (2007) is the degree of spousal support to each of the partners and for the relationship. Support process is reliably associated with good marital functioning, as well as with healthful outcomes within families. Heffner, Kiecolt-Glaser, Loving, Glaser and Malarkey (2004) argued that when looking at marital satisfaction, spousal support must be considered because supportive spouses react more positively to one another. The more satisfied spouses are with their marriage, the more likely they will approach one another in attempts to elicit support, and the more positively each will respond to these requests. As spouses work on trying to improve the marriage, the support they feel may also increase. Individuals who report higher rates of spousal support are likely to report higher levels of marital satisfaction, fewer symptoms of depression, and more manageable stress levels (Purdum, Lucas & Miller, 2006). As spousal support increases, marital satisfaction also increases (Purdum, Lucas & Miller, 2006).

*Physical violence:* Stone and Shackelford (2007) observed that physical violence has a close link with marital dissatisfaction. They indicated that individuals involve in physically abusive relationships are likely to be dissatisfied with their marriage than those who are not involve in abusive relationships.

Meanwhile the concept of marital satisfaction is used to describe the extent or degree to which a person enjoys his or her marriage. A higher level of satisfaction is seen as a measure of marital success. It is, therefore, important to study correlates of marital satisfaction in order to determine what variables could potentially predict the outcome of marital success and satisfaction. Marital satisfaction can be evaluated from the perspectives of both husbands and wives' point of view. Several factors are said to influence wives' marital satisfaction. These factors include level of intimacy, the ability to self-disclose with their spouses and perceiving their partners as responsive (Laurenceau, Barrett & Rovine, 2005). Other factors include husbands' expression of affection and amount of time spent together, as well as communication styles. On the other hand, factors associated with marital satisfaction from the husbands' point of view include satisfaction with sexual relationship, division of household tasks or view of gender roles and the extent of input they perceive they get in the relationship.

Marital satisfaction is a complex process that has over time been thought to be influenced by many factors, including education, socio-economic status, locality of residence, love, commitment, marital communication, conflict, male gender, stressors in married life, length of marriage, religiosity, the presence of children, perceived spousal values, sexual relations work-family demands, and negative affect (Al-Darmaki et al., 2014; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992; Hostetler, Desrochers, Kopko, & Moen, 2012; Olson, Marshall, Goddard, Schramm, 2016; Rostami et al., 2014; Vaez & Juhari, 2017). For the purpose of this study, influence of different personality type, age and length of marriage as predictors of marital satisfaction will be examined.

Personality is that pattern of characteristics thoughts, feelings and behaviours that distinguished one person from another and that persists over time and situation (Phares, 1991). It is the sum of biologically based and learnt behavior which forms the person's unique responses to environmental stimuli (Ryckman, 1982). The personality structure is stable and predictable throughout different situations and time (Phares, 1991). The changes which reflect events and feelings during the life span only affect the surface and not the core character. Personality on its own plays some roles in determining people's attitudes towards marriage. People's personality is the basis of who they are. People can modify specific attributes that influences every aspect of their lives ranging from employment, how they interact with their family, and their choices of friends and who to marry. A personality is a mixture of core and secondary traits. The core traits make up the basic foundation of the personality. Secondary traits are related to preferences, attitudes and situational behaviours. Overall personalities may seem to change as people grow older and their roles and the issues that matter most to people are reprioritized. It is not people's basic personality that has changed with age, but it is the habits, vigor and health, responsibilities and circumstances. There are core parts of personality that remain stable throughout life. Three aspects that do tend change as people age are anxiety level, friendliness and eagerness for novel experiences.

Myers (1980, 1995) model of personality is often used to promote mutual understanding between people. This understanding is aimed at improving interpersonal relationships and promoting positive attitudes towards people who are different such as understanding, appreciation and respect. The trait approach to personality has the idea that, people have consistent personality characteristics that can be measured and studied (Kalat, 2002). Personality includes stable and enduring traits that reveal themselves in various situations. Global assessments of personality have shown that the personality characteristics found among satisfied couples are different from those found among dissatisfied couples. Although research has shown how personality is generally associated with marital satisfaction (Amiri, Farhoodi, Abdolvand & Rezaie, 2011; Decuyper, De Bolle, & De Fruyt, 2012), Personality can influence one's opinion and behaviour. Therefore, individual differences in behavior and opinion can be explained by differences in personality. In that sense, an understanding of one's personality may help predict the extent of marital conflict. The Big Five Model comprises: Openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism

Openness to experience is a willingness to accept new learning, ideas change and variety. Conscientiousness is typically described reliability, dedication, and readiness to internalize societal norms and values. Extraversion refers to a tendency to be sociable, gregarious outgoing, warmhearted, and talkative. Agreeableness is being participative, and inclined to interact with others in a harmonious manner. Neuroticism refers to a person's overall level of maladjustment, lack of resilience and emotional instability. The opposite of neuroticism is emotional stability. Over the years research have found that apart from personality traits, they are other variables that could also predict marital satisfaction. One of these variables is the age of individuals at the time of marriage. Age at marriage is conceptualized as the age of either the man or the woman at the time of marriage. Age not only serves as a marker for development and maturity, but also signals differences in life experiences in the realms of education, financial security, marital stability, career establishment, and in the sense of readiness for the parental role (Booth & Edwards 1985; Umberson, Williams, Powers, Chen, & Campbell 2005).

Length of marriage which is also one of the variables that could predict marital satisfaction is also conceptualized as duration of marriage or how long couples have been married

or length of time husband and wife has been married is also an important factor that could influence marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was once believed to follow a u-shaped trajectory over time (Stone & Shackelford, 2007) such that husband and wife begin their marriages satisfied. This satisfaction somewhat waned over the years together (Stone & Shackelford, 2007). Studies have shown that on the average, marital satisfaction drops markedly over 10 years, and continues to gradually decrease over the subsequent decades (Stone & Shackelford, 2007). Shackelford and Buss (2010) posits that there are individual differences in the path that marital satisfaction follows over time as not all marital satisfaction decreases in a linear way (a slow, steady decrease). Contextual variables such as presence of children, mate value discrepancies and likelihood of infidelity have been identified as contributors to the general decrease in marital satisfaction over time (Stone & Shackelford, 2007). There are many variables that contribute to marital satisfaction, but the researcher is more interested in finding out the contribution of personality traits, age at marriage and length of marriage to marital satisfaction. This study intends to investigate whether: (1) Personality traits will predict marital satisfaction. (2) Age at marriage of the married person will predict marital satisfaction. (3) Length of marriage will predict marital satisfaction.

## Method

### Participants

Participants in this study were two hundred and two (68 men, 33.7% and 134 women, 66.3%) married people sampled within and outside the University community in Nsukka. The age range was 18- 42 years with a mean age of 27.37. Among the participants, 119 (58.9%) had a shorter length of marriage (0-10 years) and 83 (41.1%) married longer. Purposive random sampling technique was used. Purpose sampling is a non-probability technique whereby participants are selected based on the knowledge of the population and the purpose of the study.

### Instruments

Two instruments were used for the study: Index of Marital Satisfaction Scale (IMS) and Big Five Inventory (BFI). A section of the questionnaire also obtained information on socio-demographic factors such as length of marriage.

#### *Big Five Inventory (BFI)*

Big Five Inventory was developed by John, Donahue and Kentle (1991). It is a 44-item inventory designed to measure personality. This 44-item inventory is one of the psychological instruments which assess personality from a five-dimensional perspective, which are extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness. The BFI has direct scoring pattern for all its items, but each subscale was scored separately. It was scored on a 5-point Likert format ranging from 1 "disagree strongly" to 5 "agree strongly". John et al. (1991) reported a Cronbach alpha of .80 and a 3-month test-retest coefficient of .85. The instrument has been used in research with Nigerian samples (Umeh, 2004). BFI has mean convergent validity coefficients of .75 and .85 with the Big Five Instruments authored by Costa & Mc Crae (1992) and Goldberg (1992), respectively.

#### *Index of Marital Satisfaction (IMS)*

Index of marital satisfaction scale was developed by Hudson (1982). It is a 25-item inventory designed to measure problems associated with marital relationship. Some items on the scale include "I feel that my partner and I get along very well together"; "I feel that our relationship is very stable"; "I feel that our relationship is empty"; etc. The IMS has both direct and

indirect scoring pattern in order to reduce response set bias and to obtain consistency of scoring. Items 2, 4, 6, 7, 10, 12, 14, 15, 18, 22, 24 and 25 are directly scored while items 1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 11, 13, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21 and 23 are reversely scored. It is scored on a 5-point Likert format ranging from 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 higher scores indicate poor or problematic marital satisfaction while lower scores indicate normal or adequate marital satisfaction. Hudson (1982) reported a test retest reliability coefficient of .96 and a Cronbach's alphas of internal consistency .96. The instrument has been used in research with Nigerian samples (e.g. Anene, 1994). Omoluabi, 1994 reported a concurrent validity of .48 with Marital Distress Inventory.

### Procedure

The researchers obtained the approval for the study from the Departmental Ethical Review Board. The researchers sought the consent of the participants: married men and women who voluntarily accepted and filled the questionnaires. Out of two hundred and fifty (250) questionnaires issued out, two hundred and two (202) were correctly filled and completed. These copies were then collated and used for the data analysis.

### Design/Statistics

The study was a Cross-sectional design. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis was used to analyse the data.

### Results

In Table 1, mean scores on the factors of Big Five personality Inventory were as follows: extraversion ( $M = 32.01, SD = 5.50$ ), agreeableness ( $M = 30.04, SD = 4.49$ ), conscientiousness ( $M = 28.52, SD = 4.33$ ), neuroticism ( $M = 23.07, SD = 4.92$ ), and openness to experience ( $M = 33.46, SD = 5.78$ ). Average score for marital satisfaction was 47.82 ( $SD = 16.59$ ).

In Table 2, gender did not have a significant relationship with marital satisfaction ( $r = .13$ ). Age at marriage was negatively related to marital satisfaction ( $r = -.16, p < .05$ ). Length of marriage was not significantly associated with marital satisfaction ( $r = .09$ ). Extraversion and agreeableness were not significantly associated with marital satisfaction ( $r = -.11$  and  $r = .04$ , respectively). There was a positive association between conscientiousness and marital satisfaction ( $r = .33, p < .001$ ). Neuroticism had a negative relationship with marital satisfaction ( $r = -.30, p < .001$ ). Openness to experience was negatively associated with marital satisfaction ( $r = -.18, p < .05$ ).

Table 3 showed that extraversion did not significantly predict marital satisfaction in the sample ( $\beta = -.07, t = -.94$ ). Agreeableness did not significantly predict marital satisfaction ( $\beta = .04, t = .64$ ). Conscientiousness was found to be a positively significant predictor of marital satisfaction ( $\beta = .39, t = 6.07, p < .001$ ). The unstandardized regression coefficient ( $B = 1.51$ ) showed that for each one unit rise in conscientiousness, marital satisfaction increases by over a unit and half. Neuroticism was a negatively significant predictor of marital satisfaction ( $\beta = -.32, t = -4.89, p < .001$ ). The unstandardized regression coefficient ( $B = -1.09$ ) showed that for each one unit rise in neuroticism, marital satisfaction decreases by a little value over one unit. Openness to experience did not significantly predict marital satisfaction ( $\beta = -.11, t = -1.46$ ). Length of marriage did not significantly predict marital satisfaction ( $\beta = .07, t = 1.14$ ). Age at marriage did not significantly predict marital satisfaction ( $\beta = -.09, t = -1.47$ ). All the variables in the regression model contributed 27% (Total  $R^2 = .27$ ) to the explanation of the entire variance in marital satisfaction.

**Table 1: Mean and standard deviation of study variables**

Variable	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Marriage age	202	18.00	42.00	27.37	5.05
Extraversion	202	11.00	43.00	32.01	5.50
Agreeableness	202	11.00	43.00	30.04	4.49
Conscientiousness	202	18.00	44.00	28.52	4.33
Neuroticism	202	10.00	37.00	23.07	4.92
Openness to experience	202	14.00	45.00	33.46	5.78
Marital satisfaction	202	26.00	110.00	47.28	16.59

**Table 2: Correlations of demographic variables, personality and marital satisfaction**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1 Gender									
2 Age at marriage									
3 Length of marriage									
4 Extraversion									
5 Agreeableness									
6 Conscientiousness									
7 Neuroticism									
8 Openness									
9 Marital satisfaction									

\*\*\* $p < .001$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \* $p < .05$

**Table 3: Hierarchical multiple regression predicting marital satisfaction by personality, length of marriage and age at marriage**

Step	Predictors	B	SE	Beta( $\beta$ )	t	R <sup>2</sup>
1	Extraversion	-.20	.22	-.07	-.94	.25
	Agreeableness	.16	.25	.04	.64	
	Conscientiousness	1.51	.25	.39***	6.07	
	Neuroticism	-1.09	.22	-.32***	-4.89	
	Openness to experience	-.30	.21	-.11	-1.46	
2	Length of marriage	2.39	2.10	.07	1.14	.01
	Age at marriage	-.30	.21	-.09	-1.47	

\*\*\* $p < .001$

## Discussion

The study investigated the prediction of marital satisfaction by personality traits, age at marriage and length of marriage among married people within and outside University community Nsukka. The result shows that conscientiousness significantly and positively predicted marital satisfaction which implies that an increase in the level of conscientiousness gives marital satisfaction to the couples. Neuroticism significantly but negatively predicted marital satisfaction. This finding is partially consistent with the findings of Amiri, Farhoodi, Abdolvand and Rezaie (2011) showing that neuroticism trait had a negative and significant relationship with marital satisfaction, while agreeableness, conscientiousness, extraversion and openness to experience had a positive and significant relationship with marital satisfaction. This result seems to suggest that people who are goal-oriented, competent and disciplined in behaviours, are expected to derive more marital satisfaction in their marriages. The result seems to suggest that those who exhibit lower levels of anxiety, depression, and hostility can accommodate aversive events (i.e. those who are emotionally stable and more stress resilient) are expected to experience more satisfaction in their marriages. The result shows that age at marriage will did not significantly predict marital satisfaction. This current finding contradicts Jose and Alfons (2007) revealing that those who were older at marriage derived more satisfaction than those who married at a younger age. This present finding seems to suggest that age at marriage does not necessarily predict satisfaction in one's marriage. Erikson (1980), in his theory of psychosocial stages of human development, indicated that the "intimacy vs isolation" are occupied by people in the age bracket of (18-40 years), who have the ability to develop intimacy, ability to share and care about another person or the process of achieving relationships with family and marital partners. However, (Nwoke,

2009) observed that other factors like; education attainment, religious affiliation and socio-economic status can make people feel satisfied at marriage.

The current finding indicates that length of marriage did not significantly predict marital satisfaction. This finding is consistent with the findings of Mirfardi, Edalati and Redzuan (2010) showing that length of marriage did not predict marital satisfaction. The current finding contradicts some previous studies (e.g., Jose & Alfons, 2007; Levenson, Cartensen, & Gottman, 1993) showing that marital satisfaction or dissatisfaction can be experienced at either short- or long-term marriage. It seems to suggest that the length of marriage does not necessarily determine the satisfaction the individual will derive in marriage. Since marital satisfaction has to do with an individual's subjective evaluation of the total nature of marriage, the subjective evaluation could either be at the early stage or time of marriage or at the later stage of marriage.

## Conclusion

Results of this current study indicate that not all dimensions of personality have a role to play in marital satisfaction. An intriguing finding of this study is that individuals low on neuroticism and high on conscientiousness are more likely to derive satisfaction in their marriages than those who are high on neuroticism trait and low on conscientiousness trait. This may explain why individuals derive more marital satisfaction than others because they possess certain personality traits that predict marital satisfaction. The length of marriage on the other hand was not a predictor of marital satisfaction. Those who had been either been married for a longer period or short period of time revealed no predictions of marital satisfaction. The first limitation in the study is limited to the number of participants,

which may not allow for generalization. The second limitation in this study is the characteristics of participants who came from almost from the same locality in the South-Eastern region of Nigeria, therefore generalization to the entire population must be taken with some caution. The third limitation is trust in responding honestly to research instruments, which help in understanding the true experience of married people. We suggest that future studies consider a more representative sample across different geographical locations.

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