

Marital Satisfaction in Couples with an Alcoholic Member

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INTRODUCTION

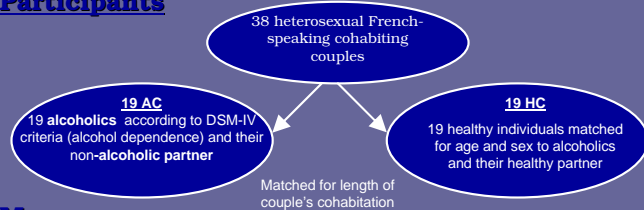
Most of the couples with an alcoholic member have reported low satisfaction about their couple relationship (review in Marshal, 2003). However, mechanisms implicated in those marital problems remained obscure. A good understanding of this phenomenon is crucial: high level of marital satisfaction and partner's implication on alcoholic treatment are good prognosis of reduction of alcohol consumption (e.g., Vannicelli et al., 1983).

- > In **Healthy Couples (HC)**: High marital satisfaction is related to (1) high **awareness** of the partner's emotional feeling states (EFS), (2) high **self-esteem**, (3) low **depression** and **anxiety**.
- > In **Alcoholic Couples (AC)**: These relations haven't been investigated yet.
 - > Alcoholics have (1) deficits in decoding non-verbal emotional cues → could contribute to problems of awareness (review in Uekerman & Daum, 2008), (2) low self-esteem (review in Corte, 2007), (3) symptoms of depression and anxiety (e.g., Kushner et al., 2005).
 - > Alcoholic partners have reported (4) more psychological distress than healthy individuals, including depression and anxiety (e.g., Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2006). Self-esteem and awareness of the spouse's EFS have not been investigated yet.

Object of the study: to compare correlates of marital satisfaction in AC and HC.

METHODS

Participants



	Alcoholic	Alcoholic Partner	CC
Sex ratio (M/F)	15/4	4/15	19/19
Age (in years) ^{NS}	47.53 (9.20)	48.26 (9.92)	47.29 (9.58)
Education (in years) ^{NS}	12.11 (3.35)	12.79 (2.59)	13.05 (3.32)
Length of relationship (in years) ^{NS}	24.16 (12.44)	24.16 (12.44)	23.58 (12.43)
Length of cohabitation (in years) ^{NS}	21.49 (12.07)	21.49 (12.07)	21.89 (11.49)
Alcoholism duration (in months, since the first hospitalisation)	43.06 (72.69)	/	/
Number of weaning cure	2.05 (2.31)	/	/
Number of days since last drink	54.35 (39.77)	/	/

Measures

• **Marital satisfaction:** *Locke and Wallace Marital Adjustment Test* (Locke & Wallace, 1959) Self-report questionnaire that evaluates marital life adaptation and happiness in marriage.

• **Awareness of the spouse's EFS:** *Part of a self-report questionnaire developed by the Catholic University of Louvain* (Belgium, Pr P. Philippot and Miss Tang).

Twenty four questions (on a 10-point Likert scale) related to (a) category of experienced emotions, (b) intensity, (c) frequency, and (d) control of these emotions. For each question, the subject has to evaluate (a) his or her own emotions (**self-attributed items**) and (b) the emotions experienced by his/her spouse (**attributed to the spouse items**) (e.g., "Do you feel shame? Never - Frequently", and "Do you think your spouse feels shame? Never - Frequently") Score: sum of the absolute values of the difference between the subject's attributed to the spouse items and his/her spouse's self-attributed items.

• **Self-esteem:** *Adult form of the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory* (Coopersmith, 1967).

58-items self-report questionnaire that measures attitudes toward the self in four areas: (a) social, (b) familial, (c) personal, and (d) professional.

• **Depression and anxiety:** *Beck Depression Inventory II* (Beck, 1996) and *State and Trait Anxiety Inventory* (Spielberger, 1983)

RESULTS

Group comparisons

	Range	Alcoholic	Alcoholic Partner	HC	F	p
Marital satisfaction	2 - 158 (higher)	94.31 (24.18)	= 81.47 (31.09)	< 118.53 (25.85)	16,31	<.001
Awareness	0 - 108 (lower)	33.05 (8.56)	= 31.63 (9.55)	> 20.21 (7.41)	20,58	<.001
Self-esteem	0 - 58 (higher)	29.63 (10.62)	= 33.11 (8.81)	< 40.26 (5.72)	7,60	<.001
Depression	0 - 63 (higher)	18.21 (11.46)	= 17.31 (9.13)	> 7.63 (8.21)	11,24	<.001
Anxiety	40 - 160 (higher)	95.32 (28.17)	= 105.32 (25.99)	> 71.39 (20.04)	14,90	<.001

Compared to CC members, AC members have reported
1. a **lower marital satisfaction**
2. a **poorer awareness** of the spouse's EFS.
3. a **lower self-esteem**
4. **more depressed and anxious symptoms.**

Correlational analyses

	Subject's Satisfaction		Spouse's Satisfaction	
	AC (n = 38)	HC (n = 38)	AC (n = 38)	HC (n = 38)
Awareness	.06	-.40*	-.14	-.49**
Self-esteem	.29	.27	.02	.22
Depression	-.21	-.11	.01	-.27
Anxiety	-.34*	-.38*	.07	-.21

*p<.05, **p<.01.

> In AC, one significant correlations emerged: The more the subject was satisfied about his/her relationship, the more he/she reported low global anxiety

> In CC, three significant correlations emerged:

• The more the subject was satisfied about his/her relationship, the more he/she reported (1) high awareness of the spouse's EFS and, (2) low global anxiety

• The more the spouse was satisfied about his/her relationship, the more the subject reported (3) high awareness of the spouse's EFS

CONCLUSIONS

> New findings:

- AC showed a more erroneous perception of their spouse's EFS than HC. The errors could be linked (1) to an impaired decoding of nonverbal behaviours, (2) to impaired verbal communication or (3) to discordance between expressed and felt emotions.
- The alcoholic as well as his/her partner report a low self-esteem compared to healthy subjects. The low self-esteem of both AC members could have repercussions on marital satisfaction (e.g., People with low self-esteem have difficulty to find evidences of their partner's acceptance).

> These findings outline the necessity to include the alcoholic partner in the treatment. A **couple** based-intervention that teaches couples emotion regulation, communication, and problem-solving skills, and led the partners through an exploration of how strong feelings affect and are affected by their relationship could be effective.