

Marital equality and the quality of long-term marriage in later life

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the relationship between husband-wife equality in late adulthood and two dimensions of marital quality: burn-out, and satisfaction with marriage. Husband-wife equality has been examined on the basis of marital power relations and the division of roles in three areas: in-home tasks, financial management, and social life. Equity theory provided the conceptual framework for the hypothesis that equality in various aspects of marriage enhances marital quality. The research sample consisted of 116 retired Israeli couples. Negative correlations were found between equality in family roles and burn-out among both husbands and wives. Surprisingly, equality in the performance of in-home roles correlated positively with burn-out among husbands. Moreover, equality in power relations correlated positively with marital satisfaction among wives. In addition, an interaction was found for wives' perceptions of equality in power relations and their husbands' level of burn-out. State of health correlated negatively with burn-out for both partners. Furthermore, husbands' religiosity explained a substantial percentage of the variance in their level of burn-out and marital satisfaction. On the whole, wives reported a higher level of burn-out and a lower level of marital satisfaction than did their husbands.

KEY WORDS – late adulthood, marital burn-out, satisfaction with marriage, division of roles, marital power relations, equity in marriage.

Introduction

The main goal of the study was to investigate the relationship between equality in marital relations in late adulthood and the quality of marital life. Equality in marriage was examined from two perspectives – the division of family roles, and power relations. These basic dimensions of spousal interaction among older couples have been researched in recent decades (Dorfman 1992). The topic is particularly relevant given the growing number of older couples who experience

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retirement together, and the overall trend for diminishing sex-role distinctions.

As far as marital quality is concerned, the study assesses two dimensions: marital satisfaction and burn-out, or exhaustion with the marriage. An individual's marital satisfaction reflects his or her evaluations of the marriage, and it affects emotional wellbeing (Atchley 1992). The conceptual framework for examining the relationship between equality in marriage and marital satisfaction is based on equity theory (Walster, Walster and Bercheid 1978). According to this theory, which has also been applied to the analysis of intimate relations (for a review, see Sprecher 2001), people seek fairness in their social relationships. Based on this premise, it can be assumed that dissatisfaction ensues when relationships are inequitable, *i.e.* when people feel over-benefited or under-benefited in their social interactions, as corroborated by several studies (Davidson 1984; Spitze 1988). Equity theory further suggests that satisfaction in social relationships is determined not only by the individual's subjective perceptions of equity, but also by the partner's perceptions (Adams 1963). Accordingly, cross-effects can be expected between one spouse's perceptions of equality and the other's satisfaction. This argument is supported by other research findings, particularly with respect to wives' assessments of fairness, which have been found to affect their husbands' feelings (Blair 1993).

Moreover, researchers argue that there may be factors such as gender role ideology that mitigate the direct relationship between equality in social relations and perceived equity (Greenstein 1996; Spitze 1988). According to this approach, couples who maintain a traditional gender role ideology are likely to perpetuate inequality in marital relations. In these contexts, equitable marital relations are perceived as those in which the wife performs most of the household tasks. Conversely, couples who maintain egalitarian gender role ideology perceive equitable marital relations to be those in which household chores are divided equally between both spouses. Based on this premise, it is assumed that the relationship between perceived equality in marriage and marital satisfaction will be greater among the couples who maintain an egalitarian gender role ideology than among those who sustain the traditional counterpart.

The other dimension of marital quality examined in the study, *i.e.* burn-out in marriage, is defined as the subjective experience of physical, emotional or mental exhaustion that occurs in a demanding, long-term relationship (Pines and Aronson 1988). It is generally accepted that burn-out is most often caused by the loss of energy that

results from minor, everyday tensions that are often difficult to identify, rather than from major life events (Etzion 1984).

Most previous studies of this topic have examined career burn-out among professionals who work in emotionally and mentally demanding fields (for an overview see Pines 1993). Relatively few studies have dealt with burn-out in marriage (Aryee 1993; Pines 1987), and they have emphasised the impact of work stress on marital relations as in the medical professions (Izraeli 1988). Moreover, very few studies have considered the marital burn-out that results from the development of spousal relations over the lifecourse, and even fewer studies have examined marital burn-out in late adulthood. Besides the family's function as the primary social group and the major source of support and comfort, family relations may generate friction and tension that eventually leads to burn-out. Since marriage is closely linked with the most critical matters in life, spouses typically share experiences that are more intense than in any other social context. Although recent years have witnessed far-reaching changes in the family unit, the main significance of marriage in most societies is that marriage is still the most important influence on the spouses' emotional and physical interdependence. The spouse's unique role in satisfying essential needs, as well as the spouses' mutual dependence, may generate stress and tensions. Despite differences among individual spouses in their commitment to an extended and 'till death' relationship, most societies continue to be oriented towards long-term marriage.

The desire to maintain the family unit on the one hand, and the tensions that may be evoked by the intensity of daily life on the other, may detract from the quality of family life. Research findings indicate that marital quality among couples who marry in young adulthood, have children, and stay married into later life follows a U-shaped trajectory (Bengston, Rosenthal and Burton 1990): marital quality tends to be high in the early years of marriage, falls significantly in the early child-rearing years, and then rises steadily thereafter (Troll, Miller and Atchley 1979). Consistent with these findings, it can be assumed that marital quality is higher in late adulthood than at other life stages. While late adulthood is characterised by relatively low stress, research has revealed points of contention between spouses. Thus, for example, elderly adults appear to adopt a rather disengaged style of communication (Mares 1995). Wives similarly report over time lower marital adjustment, and that it becomes more difficult to resolve disagreements (Vaillant and Vaillant 1993), whereas husbands report greater decline in sexual satisfaction (Heaton and Albrecht 1991). Oggins, Veroff and Leber (1993) found that older wives and, to a lesser

degree, husbands do not name their spouse as the most important confidant. Swenson, Eskew and Kohlhepp (1981) also found lower levels of self-disclosure and higher levels of unexpressed feelings among older than among younger couples.

Marital tension may also be generated by retirement, which is a significant transition in the life of both the individual and the dyad during late adulthood (Kulik 2001). During the transition to retirement, the division of family roles is likely to change as more free time becomes available to the partners. These changes may also alter the partners' perceptions of various domains of marital life (Szinovacz, DeViney and Davey 2001) and their social relationships (Lang 2001; Lang and Baltes 1997). Besides these changes, other factors may diminish marital equality during retirement. The most common belief in this regard is that the retirement of the husband impinges on the wife's domain (the household), limits her privacy, and disrupts her life routine (Keating and Cole 1980). Moreover, after retirement there may be a new ambivalence about the responsibilities of each partner (Dorfman and Heckert 1988). In addition, persistent conflicts between men and women who spend more time together after leaving the workplace may generate friction and increase marital complaints (Vinick and Ekerdt 1987).

Of the numerous factors that may contribute toward marital tension, one is inequality – particularly among couples with an egalitarian gender role orientation. In line with equity theory, those couples may view inequality in marriage as a blatant violation of egalitarian norms, and it may lead both spouses to report high levels of burn-out and low levels of marital satisfaction.

Besides the main goal of examining the relationship between marital quality and equality in marital life, another has been to compare husbands' and wives' perceptions of marital life in late adulthood. Research dealing with the level of spousal consensus in the perception of family matters has been limited, despite Bernard's (1972) well-known concept of separate 'his' or 'her' marriages. For the most part, studies conducted in the early stages of life have shown considerable couple disparity in the perception of both sexual activity (Fields 1983) and spousal parental roles (Chassin *et al.* 1985), although considerable similarity between spouses was found in their participation in household tasks after retirement (Vinick and Ekerdt 1992).

With reference to this study's focus on the impact of marital equality on satisfaction and burn-out, Gilligan's (1982) well-known approach argues that women are by nature characterised by a stronger social orientation than men, and by greater sensitivity to the needs of others. It can be inferred that equality between individuals, particularly in the

dyadic unit, is more important to women. Moreover, since the main burden of household responsibilities in late adulthood falls squarely on the woman's shoulders, as at earlier stages of family life (Dorfman 1992; Silverstein, Lawton and Bengston 1994), it is likely that wives suffer the main consequences of marital inequality and attribute more importance to the equal distribution of tasks and power in marriage. For that reason, equality in marriage may also correlate more strongly with marital quality for wives than husbands.

Finally, this study has examined differences between wives and husbands in their levels of marital satisfaction and burn-out. Studies of marital satisfaction during early stages of the relationship have found lower satisfaction among wives than husbands (Blair 1993). Some argue that women have more unrealistic expectations of marriage than men, and that their failure to realise these expectations causes lower levels of marital satisfaction (Atchley 1992). Regarding burn-out, studies of the early stages of marriage also indicate that women experience higher levels than men (Etzion 1990; Pines 1987). To explain this finding, it has been argued that women are subject to greater role conflict than men, and that the expression of burn-out is considered more legitimate for women (Pines 1987).

Research hypotheses

Based on the above literature review, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- H₁ Wives report less marital satisfaction and higher levels of burn-out than their husbands.
- H₂ Based on Walster and colleagues' (1978) equity theory, perceived equality in both power relations and the division of family roles correlates positively with marital satisfaction.
- H₃ Based on the same approach, perceived equality in power relations and in the division of family roles correlates negatively with burn-out.
- H₄ Based on Gilligan's (1982) approach, the correlation between perceived marital equality and the two dimensions of marital quality (satisfaction and burn-out) will be stronger for wives than for husbands.
- H₅ An interaction will be found between the couple's gender role ideology and equality in the marriage (in power relations and the division of family roles). Among participants with a liberal gender role ideology, the correlation between equality in marriage and both dimensions of marital quality (burn-out and satisfaction) will

be stronger than among participants with a traditional role differentiated orientation.

H6 The spouse's perceptions of equality will be related to the participant's own levels of marital satisfaction and burn-out (*i.e.* there will be a cross-effect).

As well as examining each of these hypotheses, the paper will investigate the combined impact of marital equality and the participants' socio-economic backgrounds on variation in marital satisfaction and burn-out separately for men and women.

Methods and the sample

The study sample comprised 232 Israeli retirees (or 116 married couples), aged from 58 to 85 years. The average length of marriage was 41 years (standard deviation 15), and almost all of the couples had children. Table 1 presents the distribution of participants by main background variables. Chi-squared tests were conducted in order to examine whether the husbands and wives differed in their background variables, and no significant differences were found. The principal research instrument comprised several sub-questionnaires.

Burn-out in marriage

The instrument was developed by Pines (1987) and includes 21 items representing the three dimensions of burn-out: physical, mental and emotional. Participants were asked to indicate the frequency of certain feelings in marriage, such as: 'emotional exhaustion', 'feeling trapped', 'feeling optimistic', 'feeling depressed', and 'feeling anxious'. Responses were coded on a 7-point scale that ranged from 1 (never), through 4 (sometimes), to 7 (often). An aggregate score was derived by computing the mean of the responses to the scale. Reliability scores for the instrument were high. Pines (1987) reports test-retest reliability scores when the questionnaire was re-administered after one, two and four months of 0.89, 0.76 and 0.66 respectively. Pines also reports Cronbach's Alpha internal reliability coefficients ranging from 0.91 to 0.93 (Pines 1987). In the present study, the Cronbach's Alpha value for the questionnaire was 0.90.

Marital power relations

Following Blood and Wolfe's (1960) well-known conceptualisation of marital power, the operational definition of marital power relations in the questionnaire was 'who makes decisions at home and in various

TABLE 1. Socioeconomic characteristics of the sampled husbands and wives

Attribute	Husbands		Wives	
	%	Number	%	Number
Place of Birth				
Israel	17.1	20	15.1	18
Europe	55.2	64	54.3	63
Asia-Africa	26.7	30	30.5	35
Other	1.0	2	0.0	0
Total	100	116	100	116
Education				
Primary	20.0	23	16.2	19
Partial secondary	19.0	23	30.5	35
Full secondary	31.0	36	32.5	38
BA or post-secondary	20.0	23	14.1	16
Postgraduate	9.6	11	6.6	8
Total	100	116	100	116
Religiosity				
Secular	55.4	62	52.4	61
Traditional	26.6	31	31.4	37
Orthodox	18.0	23	16.2	18
Total	100	116	100	116

areas of marital life?’ The instrument was based on a questionnaire developed by Kulik (1992), which included 20 decision-making areas in the marital life of older couples, for example: ‘Who makes decisions about the household budget?’ and ‘Who decides about giving financial assistance to the children?’ Responses were based on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (the husband always decides) to 5 (the wife always decides). A new measure of equality in marital power relations was derived from these responses.¹ On the new scale, higher scores represented higher levels of egalitarianism.

Division of family roles

Equality in division of family roles was measured through a questionnaire developed by Mann-Kanovitz (1977), which was expanded to include items relating specifically to late adulthood (Kulik 2001). The instrument included 19 items describing various tasks related to family life, which are administered in people’s homes and elsewhere. For each item, participants indicated whether the specified task was performed by the husband, by the wife, or equally by both partners. Responses were based on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (husband always) to 7 (wife always). A new measure of equality in the division of family roles was derived from this scale.² The higher the score, the more egalitarian the division of family roles.

Principal components analysis with varimax rotation revealed three factors in the questionnaire with eigenvalues of at least 1.0 that in combination explained 75.1 % of the variance. The first factor includes chores carried out in the home, such as cooking, ironing, and laundry (henceforth 'in-home roles'). The second factor includes items related to financial aspects of the household, such as allocating the family budget or managing family finances (henceforth 'financial roles'). The third factor includes social activities such as planning family vacations or trips abroad (henceforth 'social roles'). One score was derived by computing the mean of these items for each factor. Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients were 0.82, 0.83 and 0.78 for the first, second, and third factors respectively.

Gender role ideology

The measure was based on Kulik's (1992) questionnaire, and included five statements related to gender role ideology, such as: 'It's okay for women to work outside of the home', 'men should be the main breadwinners in the family', or 'fathers should assume the same degree of responsibility for child care as mothers'. Responses were based on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Three items were reverse coded in the processing stage, in order to remain consistent with the general direction of the scale. The higher the final score, the more traditional the participant's gender role attitudes. An aggregate score was derived by computing the mean of the five items. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient for the questionnaire was 0.78.

Satisfaction with marriage

The questionnaire comprised four items that indicate satisfaction with the following aspects of marriage: spousal communication, division of family roles, decision-making patterns, and emotional support from the spouse. Responses were based on a 4-point scale. The higher the score, the greater the participant's satisfaction in the respective areas of marriage. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient for the measure was 0.82.

Background variables

These questions related to variables such as sex, ethnicity, religiosity (1 = secular, 2 = traditional, and 3 = orthodox), level of education, and length of retirement. In addition, participants were asked to assess their level of health on a five-point scale.

Data collection

The data were collected in 1997 and 1998 by eight research assistants, as part of a larger project on marital relations in late adulthood conducted at a university in Israel. The research assistants distributed questionnaires to participants at community pensioners' clubs in seven different areas of the country. Four of the sampling areas were rural, and three were development towns. The clubs offer diverse activities for senior citizens such as lectures, entertainment, trips, and recreational sports. Pensioners attending these activities were generally healthy, mobile, and came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Participants in the study were asked to complete the questionnaire at the club. When both partners attended the activity, the research assistants made sure that they filled out the questionnaire separately. In these cases, the response rate was high (80 per cent). If only one partner attended the activity, that partner filled out the questionnaire, and the research assistant scheduled a separate meeting with the other spouse at their home. Here, too, the research assistant made sure that participants filled out the questionnaire themselves, without assistance from the spouse. In these cases, the response rate was lower (70 per cent). About 70 per cent of the questionnaires were filled out at clubs by both partners, and 30 per cent were filled out by one partner at the club and by the other partner at home. The average time required for completion of the questionnaire was 20 minutes.

To determine whether there were differences between husbands and wives with respect to both the dependent (burn-out and marital satisfaction) and the independent (related to gender role ideology, power relations, and division of family roles) variables, analyses of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measurements for the partners were carried out. In addition, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to examine whether the marital equality variables were related to burn-out and marital satisfaction. Finally, stepwise hierarchical regression analyses examined the combined contribution of the equality variables toward explaining marital satisfaction and burn-out among husbands and wives.

Results

Differences between husbands and wives

The study examined spousal differences in the research variables, as reflected in the hypothesis that wives will report a lower level of

TABLE 2. *Differences between husbands and wives in marital roles and satisfaction*

	Husbands		Wives		F ratio
	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	
Burn-out	2.67	0.89	2.80	0.82	4.53*
Satisfaction	3.09	0.78	2.92	0.88	7.45**
Marital power relations	2.88	0.41	2.91	0.44	0.43
Social roles	3.31	0.80	3.37	0.79	0.48
Financial roles	2.25	0.74	2.28	0.82	0.41
In-home roles	2.14	0.61	2.12	0.67	0.44
Gender role ideology	3.30	0.68	3.39	0.64	1.40

Notes: s.d. standard deviation. Differences between husbands and wives: $F(2, 103) = 4.06$, $p < 0.01$. Differences between types of family roles: $F(2, 103) = 113.5$, $p < 0.001$.

Significance levels: * $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$.

satisfaction and a higher level of burn-out than their husbands (Hypothesis 1). Figure 1 indicates that in general, levels of burn-out reported by husbands and wives were relatively low. Mean scores for both spouses were close to 3, *i.e.* just below the midpoint (4) of the burn-out scale, which ranged from 1 to 7 (see Table 2). By contrast, level of satisfaction reported by both partners were high (close to 3 and well above the midpoint value of 2 on the scale from 1 to 4).

Multiple analyses of variance (MANOVA) with repeated measurements for partners of the dependent variables (burn-out and satisfaction) revealed differences between husbands and wives (for F values see Table 2). Moreover, univariate ANOVA carried out for each of the dependent variables revealed significant differences between the spouses in each area (see Table 2): wives reported a higher level of burn-out and a lower level of marital satisfaction than their husbands. Regarding the independent variables (power relations, division of family roles, and gender role ideology), MANOVA with repeated

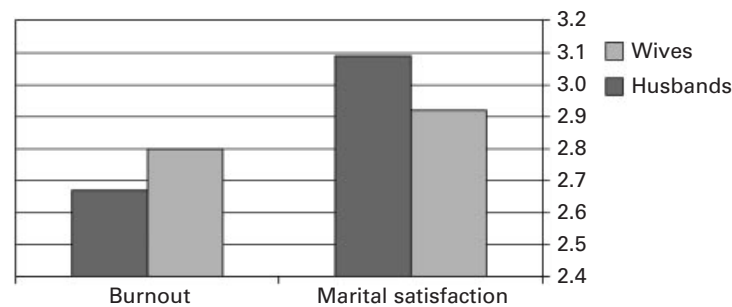


Figure 1. Burn-out and marital satisfaction: wives vs. husbands.

measurements for partners revealed no significant differences. Table 2 shows high levels of perceived equality for both spouses (significantly above midpoint 2) in the dimension of power relations.

Even though no specific hypothesis was put forward regarding the most egalitarian of the three types of family roles (in-home, financial, and social), two-way MANOVAs (participants' sex by three types of task) with repeated measurements carried out for the type of task, revealed significant differences (for F values see Table 2). Furthermore, Newman Keuls tests, conducted in order to determine the source of the differences, showed significant discrepancies between social roles versus financial and in-home roles. It can therefore be argued that the division of social roles was assessed as more egalitarian than financial and in-home roles. Notably, this analysis found no significant interaction between the participant's sex and the type of role. In sum, the results indicate that husbands and wives maintained similar perceptions of marital power relations and of equality in the division of their gender roles. As far as social roles are concerned, levels of perceived equality were relatively high, followed by financial roles and then by in-home roles. These perceptions were shared by both partners. Differences between husbands and wives, however, were found with respect to the two marital-quality dimensions. Specifically, wives reported a higher level of burn-out and a lower level of satisfaction with marriage than did their husbands.

Equality in marital relations and dimensions of marital quality

In order to examine Hypotheses 2, 3 and 4, Table 3 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients between dimensions of marital quality (burn-out and satisfaction) and the three sets of independent variables: background variables, perceived equality in marriage (power relations and division of family roles), and indicators of gender role ideology. Correlations between the independent and dependent research variables were calculated separately for husbands and wives.

On the whole, the strength and directions of the correlations were similar for both spouses. In addition, more significant correlations between background variables and dimensions of marital quality were found for husbands than for wives. Of the background variables examined, significant negative correlations were found between perceived state of health and levels of burn-out for husbands and wives: the better their perceived health, the lower their levels of burn-out. As far as marital satisfaction was concerned, however, positive correlations with health were only found for husbands.

TABLE 3. *Correlations with marital satisfaction and burn-out*

Variables	Husbands		Wives	
	Burn-out	Satisfaction	Burn-out	Satisfaction
Background attributes				
Age	+ 0.10	+ 0.02	+ 0.07	+ 0.18
Length of retirement	+ 0.21*	+ 0.10	+ 0.23*	+ 0.06
Education	- 0.13	+ 0.21*	- 0.16	+ 0.16
Religiosity	- 0.23*	+ 0.32***	+ 0.08	+ 0.12
Health	- 0.42***	+ 0.24***	- 0.42***	+ 0.14
Equity dimensions				
Social roles	- 0.25**	+ 0.36***	- 0.33***	+ 0.28*
Financial roles	+ 0.06	+ 0.06	+ 0.02	+ 0.03
In-home roles	+ 0.05	- 0.16	+ 0.03	+ 0.11
Marital power relations	- 0.20*	+ 0.31***	- 0.34***	+ 0.35***
Gender role ideology	+ 0.04	- 0.13	- 0.19	+ 0.07

Notes: Pearson correlation coefficients.

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Correlations were also found between the length of retirement and burn-out for both partners: the longer the period of retirement, the higher the reported level of burn-out. In addition, positive correlations between the level of education and marital satisfaction were found for husbands, as well as a negative correlation between religiosity and burn-out. The higher the husbands' level of education, the greater their marital satisfaction; and the higher their level of religiosity, the lower their level of burn-out. In addition, the higher the husbands' level of religiosity, the greater their marital satisfaction. For the wives, religiosity and education were not related to any of the marital quality dimensions. In order to examine the impact of another background variable, place of birth (Israel, Europe, Asia-Africa) on the two dimensions of marital quality, analyses of variance were conducted separately for husbands and wives. These analyses revealed that place of birth has no significant effect on marital satisfaction and burn-out.

As far as perceived equality in division of family roles was concerned, only social roles correlated with the dependent research variables. For both partners, the higher the level of perceived equality in social roles, the lower their level of burn-out and the greater their marital satisfaction. It should be mentioned that no relationship was found between perceived equality in division of in-home and financial roles, and the marital quality variables for either partner.

Equality in marital power relations correlated significantly with burn-out and marital satisfaction for both partners: the greater the perceived equality in power relations, the lower the level of burn-out

and the higher the level of marital satisfaction for both partners. However, no relationship was found between gender role ideology and either of the dependent research variables.

Background variables, marital equality and marital burn-out and satisfaction

To examine the combined contribution of the independent variables in explaining the variance in each of the dimensions of marital quality (burn-out and marital satisfaction), hierarchical stepwise regression analyses were conducted separately for husbands and wives. Another aim of these regression analyses was to test Hypotheses 5 and 6.

In each of the regression equations, the following background variables were entered at the first step: health, religiosity, education, and duration of retirement. This method was employed in order to control for the effect of background variables on the dimensions of marital equality that were entered into the regression equation in later stages. Gender role ideology was entered into the regression equation at the second step, for its potential impact on the performance of family roles and on marital power relations. At the third step, the following dimensions of equality were entered into the regression: marital power relations and the three types of family roles (social, financial, and in-home).

At the fourth step, the interactions between gender role ideology and each of the equality dimensions (power relations and division of family roles) were entered into the equation. This method was employed so as to determine whether the relationship between marital equality (in power relations and division of family roles) and quality of marriage (burn-out and satisfaction) differed among couples with liberal versus traditional gender role ideology (Hypothesis 5).

In the fifth step, the partners' perceptions of marital equality were entered for each of the respective dimensions: power relations, division of family roles, and gender role ideology. This method was employed in order to examine whether there was a cross-effect between the spouses' perceptions regarding the various dimensions of marital equality and the participants' own feelings of burn-out and marital satisfaction (Hypothesis 6).

Burn-out

Background variables and marital equality factors explained 38 per cent of the variance in burn-out for husbands and 30 per cent for wives. For both partners, perceived state of health contributed significantly toward explaining the variance in burn-out: the better their state of

TABLE 4. *Hierarchical regression coefficients for husbands' burn-out*

Predictors	β	B	s.e. B ^a	R ²
Step 1				0.23***
Health	-0.42***	-9.41	0.45	
Religiosity	-0.22*	-5.73	0.27	
Step 3				0.33***
Health	-0.44***	-10.0	0.47	
Religiosity	-0.21*	-5.61	0.26	
Equality – social roles	-0.27**	-6.61	-0.31	
Equality – in-home roles	0.26**	8.21	0.59	
Step 5				0.38***
Health	-0.39***	8.81	2.36	
Religiosity	-0.18*	4.70	2.53	
Equality – social roles	-0.20*	-2.71	4.91	
Equality – in-home roles	0.37**	1.75	3.67	
Equality – power relations	-0.29***	-1.07	0.45	

Notes: a: standard error of B. Variables from Steps 2 and 4 were not entered into the regression equation.

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

health, the lower their reported level of burn-out. For husbands, religiosity also contributed toward explaining burn-out in marriage, *i.e.* the more religious the husband, the lower the reported level of burn-out (see Table 4).

For wives, gender role ideology also contributed towards explaining burn-out in marriage: the more liberal the wife's gender role ideology, the lower her level of burn-out. For both partners, equality in social roles contributed significantly towards explaining burn-out: the greater the equality in social roles, the lower the level of burn-out felt by both spouses. For husbands, equality in performance of in-home roles contributed significantly towards burn-out. Surprisingly, however, the contribution was positive, *i.e.* the higher the level of perceived equality in the area of in-home roles, the higher a husband's level of burn-out. In addition, the wives' assessments of power relations contributed toward explaining their husbands' reported level of burn-out. Thus, the more a wife reported equality in marital power relations, the less the husband felt burn-out in marriage (see Table 5).

Marital satisfaction

The background variables and dimensions of equality in marriage explained greater percentages of the variance in marital satisfaction for husbands (29 per cent) than wives (18 per cent). Essentially, only one equality variable, marital power relations, entered the regression equation for wives ($\beta = 0.35$). The higher the level of equality in

TABLE 5. Hierarchical regression coefficients for wives' burn-out

Predictors	β	B	s.e. B ^a	R ²
Step 1				0.18**
Health	-0.42***	-0.42	0.10	
Step 2				0.22**
Health	-0.43**	0.43	0.10	
Gender role ideology	-0.19*	0.28	0.16	
Step 5				0.30***
Health	-0.43**	-0.43	0.21	
Gender role ideology	0.09	-0.14	0.15	
Equality in social roles	-0.31***	-0.39	0.13	

Notes: a: standard error of B. Variables from Steps 3 and 4 were not entered into the regression equation.

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

TABLE 6. Hierarchical regression coefficients for husbands' marital satisfaction

Predictors	β	B	s.e. B ^a	R ²
Step 1				0.16***
Religiosity	0.32**	0.34	0.12	
Health	0.24*	0.23	0.10	
Step 2				0.29***
Health	0.36**	0.39	0.11	
Religiosity	0.24*	0.16	0.10	
Equality – social roles	0.32**	0.34	0.11	

Notes: a: standard error of B.

Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

marital power relations, the greater the wives' satisfaction with marriage. For husbands, religiosity and health contributed significantly towards explaining marital satisfaction (about 16 per cent). Thus, the more religious the husbands and the better their perceived state of health, the higher their level of marital satisfaction. In addition, perceived equality in social relations contributed toward the husbands' level of marital satisfaction: the higher the level of this variable, the greater the husbands' marital satisfaction (see Table 6).

Discussion

Marriage can be viewed as a social context in which rules are set in a continuing process of negotiation between spouses (Buckley 1967). These rules encompass aspects such as marital power relations and

division of family roles. In the early stages of marriage, couples often maintain gender role norms that had been developed through anticipatory socialisation (Atchley 1992). These norms may follow a traditional hierarchical system that prescribes male dominance, or they may emphasise equality in spousal relations. During the course of marriage, however, the partners' changing needs and expectations are addressed in a complex process of negotiation that persists throughout the marital life cycle. The partners' attempts to respond to each other's changing needs may generate anger and frustration that detract from the quality of the marriage.

The present study focused primarily on the relationship between perceptions of equality or inequality in marriage (which may also be a potential source of spousal tension) and the two dimensions of marital quality. One of the main findings is that elderly Israeli couples maintain relatively high levels of marital equality and share similar perspectives on decision-making and the division of family roles. These results suggest that after living together for some 40 years, couples develop similar perspectives on marriage which lead to harmonious marital relations. Indeed, this trend was reflected in the low level of burn-out reported by husbands and wives, as well as in a high level of satisfaction in various areas of marriage. This finding may be attributed to improved spousal relations at this stage of marriage. Moreover, it is possible that couples who remain together for so many years are 'marital survivors', who naturally express high levels of marital quality. Indeed, divorce rates among Israeli couples in this age bracket are extremely low – approximately four per cent of all divorces (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics 2000: Table 3.8). Notably, the husbands reported a higher level of satisfaction and a lower level of burn-out than wives. The findings on burn-out are consistent with other results, which indicate that even in the early stages of marriage wives report a higher level of burn-out than their husbands (Etzion 1984; Pines 1987). Levinson, Carstensen and Gottman (1993) similarly reported that among older couples, wives are more likely than husbands to consider separation.

One possible explanation for this finding is that in late adulthood, as in earlier periods of marriage, the burden of maintaining the household falls on the wife's shoulders (Keating and Cole 1980; Vinick and Eckerdt 1987), generating cumulative tension which ultimately leads to burn-out. Alternatively, differences in the extent of burn-out reported by husbands and wives can be attributed to prevailing social norms which legitimate women's complaints of emotional and physical weakness (Forbes and Martin 1990; Zahn-Waxler, Cole and Barrett

1991). Thus, unlike their wives, even if husbands feel exhaustion they are reluctant to report it. Pines (1987) used the same instrument to compare burn-out among younger spouses, and found a higher level of burn-out among wives than husbands (average 3.0 for wives, and 2.6 for husbands). As mentioned, in the present study wives also reported a higher level of burn-out than their husbands, although the gap was smaller (2.8 for wives, 2.6 for husbands). Comparison of the two studies suggests that husbands' burn-out is stable throughout the marital life cycle, whereas for wives it declines with age. This distinction is consistent with the contention that women gain power as they grow older, and that they report less exhaustion in later life than at earlier stages of the marriage (Friedman 1987; Guttman 1970). Furthermore, the relatively low level of marital satisfaction reported by wives is well documented in the literature on the early stages of marriage. Besides attributing these differences in levels of satisfaction to high expectations of marriage (Kerchoff 1964; Thurnher 1975), it may also be claimed that men gain more from the marital relationship and therefore report a higher level of satisfaction than their wives (Belle 1982; Cleary and Mechanic 1983). This explanation is reinforced in late adulthood, when the children leave home and the wife becomes less dependent on her husband for help with childcare. Moreover, research findings indicate that after retirement husbands become more dependent on their wives for the satisfaction of their social needs (Henkens 1999; Troll, Miller and Atchley 1979).

In the area of social roles, particularly high levels of equality were found. This result can be attributed to the decline in social contacts after retirement, and possibly to the increased amount of time that spouses spend together (Bosse *et al.* 1990). Equality-inequality in social roles also contributed significantly toward explaining burn-out and marital satisfaction among both spouses. Notably, inequality in this area may arouse feelings of neglect and create tensions that ultimately exacerbate burn-out and reduce marital satisfaction. In line with this argument, Ward (1992) found that marital satisfaction in late adulthood is related to the amount of time that the couple spends together.

The unexpected positive correlations found between equality in division of in-home roles and burn-out among husbands are also noteworthy. Previous research has found that even when in-home roles are equally divided, the feelings generated by such co-operation are not necessarily positive. For example, husbands may see the carrying out of household chores as a decline in social status (as they experience after retirement in any case), whereas women may interpret the husband's

desire to help as invading their natural territory (Mason 1987). Moreover, in cases where the husband is hesitant about participating in household chores, his co-operation is obtained through a protracted and complicated negotiation with the wife. Following this process, even if in-home roles are ultimately divided equally, a residual tension may lead to burn-out and reduce the husband's marital satisfaction.

The cross-effect between wives' evaluations of equality in marital power relations and husbands' levels of burn-out is particularly noteworthy. The more the wives reported unequal power relations, the greater the husbands' tendency toward burn-out. It should be mentioned that the impact of one spouse's perceived equality on the other spouse's sense of burn-out was only distinguished in this area. The impact of the wives' perceptions of her husband's feelings has also been found in studies conducted at earlier stages of marriage (Blair 1993; Orbuch and Eyster 1997), and can be partially attributed to the assumption that women are generally more expressive than men. Thus, wives may complain more about lack of involvement in household decisions. When these complaints persist, husbands may begin to feel burn-out. The importance attributed by wives to equality in power relations is reflected not only in the cross-effects of husbands' burn-out, but also in the finding that the wife's satisfaction with marriage is explained by her own perceptions of equality in power relations.

In this connection, it should be noted that the research variables explained only a small portion of the variance in the wives' marital satisfaction. This finding may be attributed to the wives' relatively high expectations of marriage (Atchley 1992). Because equality in marriage is only one aspect of these expectations, it would be worthwhile to explore other dimensions of marriage that could shed further light on correlates of marital satisfaction among wives.

Regarding the background variables, more significant correlations with the respective dimensions of marital quality were found for husbands than for wives. The contribution of perceived state of health toward the various aspects of marital quality is particularly salient, as has been well documented (Lee and Shehan 1989; Okun 1987; Steverink, Lindenberg and Ormel 1998). Moreover, husbands' religiosity correlated with the two dimensions of marital quality, corroborating the findings of Fry (2000). In this connection, Shoval, Fleischman and Shmueli (1984) found a relationship between husband's religiosity and social support. People who pray together several times a day during the week and on festivals (mainly among men in Orthodox Jewish circles) are part of a small, intimate group whose positive influence may spill over to the family sphere and

mitigate feelings of burn-out. In addition, going to the synagogue is an activity that Orthodox Jewish men continue after retirement. This stability may have a positive impact on the husband's sense of well-being in the midst of the changes that occur after they leave the workplace.

To summarise the research findings, it should be borne in mind that the sample was based on participants who regularly participate in social activities at pensioners' clubs throughout the country, and all were relatively mobile, healthy and able to go out regularly. Moreover, it can be assumed that the activities attended by the participants in the study may spill over to their marital relationship and influence their perceptions of marital life. To reach more general conclusions on the issues investigated in the study, a more diverse sample would need to be investigated.

Finally, equity theory, which constituted the theoretical framework of this study, was partially supported by the research findings. First, contrary to the argument that perceived equity is determined by gender role ideology, it was found that, regardless of the individual's gender role ideology, perceived marital equality in late adulthood is related to the dimensions of marital quality examined in this study. This conclusion, however, applies primarily to social roles and power relations, but less to other dimensions of equality. In addition, the hypothesised cross-effect of one spouse's evaluations of equality on the other spouse's quality of marriage was found only for men. Taken together, these findings suggest possible directions for adaptation of equity theory to the context of marital life. Specifically, it would be worthwhile for future studies on equity in marital relations to integrate the contingency concept, which is commonly applied in literature dealing with organisational issues such as effectiveness (Woodward 1965) and leadership (Fiedler 1965) in organisations.

Application of the contingency concept to the context of marital relations is likely to reveal that different aspects of marital equality are relevant at different stages of life. It can, for example, be assumed that young couples, who focus on raising children and establishing a career, will emphasise equality in the activities related to maintenance of the home (*e.g.* in-home roles), to balance the demands of work and the family. The current findings suggest that after retirement, the social dimension of marital life becomes increasingly relevant, while equality in social roles may improve the quality of marriage.

To generalise and establish this initial idea, further research should examine broader samples. These studies should explore various aspects of marriage at different stages of the life cycle. In this study, perceived

equity was assessed in terms of equality in marriage. A relevant question is whether all couples consider marital equality to be the same as marital equity? Examination of interactions between marital equality and gender role ideology in this study provided a partial answer to this question. Specifically, marital equality was found to be related to some dimensions of marital quality, regardless of gender role ideology. However, in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the relevance of equity theory to assessments of marital life, future research should examine perceptions of equality and fairness as separate variables, and consider the relationship of each variable to dimensions of marital quality. This approach will provide a basis for more accurate conclusions regarding the question: Is perceived equity in marriage tantamount to perceived equality, and does this perception predict satisfaction and burn-out in marital relations?

Recommendations

The research findings prompt several practical recommendations. First, because equality in social aspects of marriage was found to be a good predictor of marital satisfaction and correlated negatively with burn-out, family therapists should emphasise this dimension and guide couples toward enhancing partnership in social roles. Second, because equality in division of in-home roles had a negative impact on husbands' feelings, the source of this relationship should be carefully examined. When attainment of equality in this area entails constant negotiations between partners or generates marital tension, practitioners should help couples mitigate their negative feelings and focus on positive aspects of partnership as well as on the importance of sharing the burden of family responsibilities in late adulthood.

NOTES

- 1 The values on the original scale of 1 (the husband always decides) and 5 (the wife always decides) were coded on the new variable as 1 (non-egalitarian decisions). Values on the original scale of 2 (the husband usually decides) and 4 (the wife usually decides) were coded as 2 (somewhat non-egalitarian). Mid-point 3 on the original scale became 3 on the new variable and represented 'equality' in marital power relations. A single score was derived from the mean of the 20 items. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient for this instrument was 0.83.
- 2 Values of 1 (husband always) and 7 (wife always) were coded as 1 (very unequal division of family roles). Values of 2 (usually husband) and 6 (usually wife) were coded as 2 (moderate inequality in family roles). Values of 3 (husband sometimes)

and 5 (wife sometimes) were coded as 3 (moderate equality in family roles). Value 4 (equality) was coded as 4, and indicated maximal equality.

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