

THE PERSONALIZED SPOUSE OBSERVATION CHECKLIST: A COMPUTER-GENERATED ASSESSMENT OF MARITAL INTERACTION

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The Spouse Observation Checklist (SOC) (Patterson, 1976) has become an integral part of behavioral marital treatment approaches in recent years. Jacobson and Margolin (1979) have called the SOC one of the most valuable tools available to the behavioral marital therapist, and Christensen and Nies (1980) claim that the SOC has been crucial to the development of behavioral marital therapy. The checklist contains approximately 400 behaviors spanning 12 areas of marital interaction that have been categorized a priori as "pleasing" or "displeasing." Spouses are typically instructed to monitor these events by going through the entire inventory each evening and checking the behaviors their partner performed during the preceding 24 hours. Some modified versions of the SOC have recently been developed (Weiss & Perry, 1983). At present, however, no studies have been published which examine psychometric properties of these modified versions.

Gurman, Knudson and Kniskern (1978) have criticized the SOC for its organization of events into pleasing and displeasing categories, arguing that certain events on the checklist may be pleasing for some individuals and displeasing for others. They feel that the SOC communicates to couples that certain events "should" be pleasing or displeasing, or worse yet, that events listed as pleasing are "good," and events listed as displeasing are "bad." They state that many of the events listed as displeasing may actually be healthy for a marriage, and conclude that the SOC may subtly encourage repression of conflict.

Another criticism of the SOC is that it is too long and tiresome to complete every night. A fluent reader familiar with the SOC can complete it in less than fifteen minutes. However, it may take a slower reader an hour to complete it, thus becoming an aversive task (Jacobson & Margolin, 1979). Finally, in order to complete the checklist, a spouse must read through all 400 items, many of which are not relevant to him or her, e.g., the item, "we played with our pets" only applies to those who have pets.

In light of the above criticisms, a revised form of the SOC has been developed, using computer word-processing functions.¹ An assessment form was devised that lists all items from the original SOC in random order, and asks spouses to categorize each event as "pleasing," or "displeasing," "neither pleasing nor displeasing," or "not relevant." All items marked as "neither pleasing nor displeasing" or "not relevant" are deleted from the original pool of items. The computer then prints out a personalized form of the SOC for each partner. The search and replace function (common to most word processing packages) also allows spouses' actual names to be entered into the items.

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The original and personalized SOC forms were tested for equivalency. It was hypothesized that, since only neutral and irrelevant items were deleted in the personalized SOC, the two SOC forms would yield equivalent frequencies of pleasing and displeasing items checked.

METHOD

Twenty-two married individuals served as voluntary subjects. Eleven subjects were male, and 11 were female. None of the subjects were married to each other. Subjects were generally young, well educated, middle income (\$16-26,000 gross annual income), not previously married, had well-adjusted marriages (\bar{x} MAT score = 117.73, sd = 23.9) (Locke & Wallace, 1959) and had few children.

Subjects filled out both the original version of the SOC and the personalized SOC for five consecutive days. The SOC forms were counterbalanced so that half of the subjects completed the original SOC during the first five days while the other half completed the personalized SOC. Then, in the second five-day period, subjects completed the form they had not completed the first five days. The five-day periods were separated by a two-day weekend. Subjects were randomly assigned to receive either the original SOC or the personalized SOC during the first five days. In addition to keeping track of total pleases and displeases checked during each five-day period, subjects were also asked to keep careful track of how much time they spent with their spouse each day, since it was believed that the amount of time spent together would affect the frequency of items checked.

Differences between the two SOC forms were analyzed using one-way repeated measures ANCOVA. Consistent with the majority of research using the SOC as a dependent measure, total frequency of pleases and displeases checked were used as dependent measures in this study. Total time spouses spent together served as the covariate, and the two different SOC forms served as repeated measures. The degree of relationship between the total number of items checked on the two SOC forms was analyzed using a Pearson product-moment correlation.

RESULTS

Subjects eliminated an average of 128 on the original 400 SOC-items in the assessment phase (sd = 38.29). The repeated measures analyses of covariance indicated that there were no significant differences between SOC forms on either of the dependent measures. For the analysis using total pleases as the dependent variable, $F(1,21) = .594$, $p = .45$, long form $\bar{x} = 51$ ($sd = 37$), short form $\bar{x} = 47$ ($sd = 39$); and for the analysis using total displeases, $F(1,21) = 2.23$, $p = .152$, long form $\bar{x} = 2.7$ ($sd = 2.29$), short form $\bar{x} = 2.15$ ($sd = 2.09$). The Pearson r used to determine the degree of relationship between the total number of items checked on the two SOC forms was .91.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that the personalized, computer-generated SOC answers both theoretical and pragmatic criticisms of the original SOC. By allowing individuals to define for themselves what events are pleasing (reinforcing) and displeasing (aversive), the personalized SOC is more consistent with social learning theory from which behavioral marital therapy approaches have been derived. By eliminating irrelevant items, a more practical, efficient instrument is created. The personalized SOC's were an average of 32% shorter than the original SOC's, and yet similar rates of pleasing and displeasing events were recorded by the subjects on each of the forms. The possibility should be recognized that items considered irrelevant by an individual at one point in

time may become relevant in the future. Therefore, it is suggested that individuals in marital therapy periodically reconstruct their personalized SOC should they stay in therapy an extended period of time.

Of course, to the extent that the sample size and characteristics of this sample are limited, the generalizability of the results are likewise limited. However, the data from this study suggest the personalized SOC as a valuable alternative to the original SOC.

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NOTE

¹No special computer program was developed to achieve the processing needed in this study. The processing functions used are already in most word processing software packages. Once the SOC items are typed onto a computer disk, the program needs only to be able to delete whole lines, and to search for specific words and replace them with others.