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Values and Virtues as Correlates of Quality and Stability of Romantic Relationships and Marriage in a Post-Socialist Transitional Society

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Abstract: An individual's value system plays an important role in their intimate relationship or marriage. Most marital satisfaction research to date has been carried out in high-income liberal Western societies. We conducted an original quantitative empirical survey of virtues and values to examine their effect on relationship quality and stability in a sample of 511 respondents from Slovenia, a post-socialist society in transition. The results showed that respondents rated health, love, and safety at the top of their hierarchy of values. The key finding was that the presence of love was associated with an individual's subjective perception of relationship quality but had no effect on the self-evaluation of relationship stability. In addition to love, both family safety and comfort were significant correlates of relationship quality while self-respect was negatively correlated with relationship quality. Only excitement was found to have a statistically significant effect on relationship stability.

Keywords: marital quality; marital stability; love; virtues; values



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1. Introduction

1.1. Introductory Remarks and Study Aims

The study of marital satisfaction and quality has a longstanding academic tradition. As marriage rates have declined and divorce rates have increased in recent decades, research interest in the marriage has blossomed (Fincham and Beach 2010). Numerous studies have established a link between marital satisfaction and a range of important life outcomes. Marital quality is linked to an increased quality of life (Carr et al. 2014), as well as better health and a lower mortality risk (Robles et al. 2014). Longitudinal studies suggest a causal pathway between marital dissatisfaction and depression, particularly in women (Fincham et al. 1997; Beach et al. 2003; Hollist et al. 2007). Parental marital distress and conflict can also predict adjustment problems in adolescent children (Cui et al. 2005). As with many other psychological constructs however, the preponderance of existing studies on marital satisfaction have been carried out in high income, highly educated, post-industrial liberal democratic Western societies which may limit the generalisability of the findings (Dobrowolska et al. 2020).

The present study aims to address this gap in the literature and expand upon the existing body of marital satisfaction research by applying common concepts and themes to a previously understudied sociocultural environment: formerly communist parts of Europe. To this end, we situated our study in Slovenia, a majority Roman Catholic country located at the geographic and cultural crossroads of the East and West. Since gaining independence from the former Yugoslavia in 1991, Slovenia has been undergoing a period

of rapid post-socialist transition toward liberal democracy, free market capitalism, and the rule of law, achieving European Union (EU) and NATO membership in 2004, and OECD membership in 2010. We aimed to carry out a comprehensive survey of the moral landscape in contemporary Slovenian marriage.

1.2. Theoretical Background

1.2.1. Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Values and Marital Satisfaction

A recent large cross-cultural survey addressing the dearth of non-Western marital literature used self-report data from 7178 participants in 33 countries spanning Europe (including Eastern and Southeast Europe), Asia, Africa, North America, and Latin America (Sorokowski et al. 2017). The results indicated that demographic factors (including gender, age, religiosity, economic status, and education) but not marriage duration, number of children, or a country's gross domestic product (GDP) were associated with marital satisfaction, while there was a positive association between collectivism and marital satisfaction (Dobrowolska et al. 2020).

In a recent literature overview, several values including romantic love, gratitude, and forgiveness emerged as potential predictors of marital satisfaction in collectivist and individualist cultures (Kazim and Rafique 2021). Cultural environment is an important determinant of how marriage and the family are conceptualised by members of a society. Unlike in Western cultures where individual freedom, the pursuit of happiness, and the fulfilment of personal goals and needs are of paramount importance, in collectivist cultures, marriage may be viewed as more of an agreement between two families with the aim of solidifying familial bonds or enhancing communal well-being, solidarity, childrearing etc. In some cultural contexts where arranged marriages are commonplace, marriages may not be based on romantic love per se. Such cultural differences could be expected to lead to differing beliefs on what constitutes a happy marriage. In a survey of people living in arranged marriages versus marriages of choice, spousal shared values were rated significantly lower in American marriages of choice than in either arranged marriages of persons of Indian descent living in the United States or arranged marriages of Indians living in India (Madathil and Benschhoff 2008). Those living in arranged marriages in the United States reported higher levels of marital satisfaction than the other two groups (Madathil and Benschhoff 2008). This underscores the fact that values may vary in their effects on marital satisfaction depending on the cultural milieu being studied.

In collectivist Asian cultures, family- and relationship-oriented values may be particularly emphasised since these societies prioritise the family (Chen et al. 2009; Chi et al. 2020). In a recent large, nationally representative sample of Chinese couples, couples were found to share greater similarity in relationship-oriented values than randomly matched pairs of men and women (Chi et al. 2020). Higher scores on relationship-oriented values were associated with greater marital satisfaction in husbands but not wives; furthermore, relationship-oriented values had an effect not only on marital satisfaction, but also an indirect effect on life satisfaction in general via the mediating effect of marital satisfaction (Chi et al. 2020). In a similar vein, Quek and Fitzpatrick (2013) found that in Singapore, the association between the cultural value of collectivism and marital satisfaction was significant in husbands but not wives. Since men and women may prioritise different factors when deciding whether to get married and/or stay married, this underscores the need for possible gender differences to be taken into consideration when studying the link between values and marital satisfaction.

Cultural context appears to even moderate the influence of a fundamental aspect of marriage—procreation—on marital satisfaction. This is best illustrated by comparing the results of two meta-analyses on the topic (Twenge et al. 2003; Dillon and Beechler 2010). In the first meta-analysis, parents were found to have significantly lower marital satisfaction scores than non-parents and there was a significant negative correlation between marital satisfaction and the number of children which the authors attributed to “role conflicts and restriction of freedom” after becoming a parent (Twenge et al. 2003, p. 574). However, a

subsequent meta-analysis of 15 studies from collectivist cultures found that the negative correlation between children and marital satisfaction was trivially small (explaining only 0.3% of the variance) and substantially lower than the effect observed in Western samples (Dillon and Beechler 2010). Such discrepant findings stress the importance of considering the role of culture in research on predictors of marital satisfaction.

1.2.2. Values, Virtues, and Marital Quality

One of the central questions in the marital quality literature relates to couple similarity. In other words: *do birds of a feather flock together?* In a meta-analytic review of premarital predictors of marital quality, Jackson (2009) found that similarity in religiosity, attitudes and couple similarity factors were significant predictors of marital quality with medium effect sizes. Of these factors, only religiosity similarity was significantly predictive of marital stability. However, it should be noted that the most significant protective factor against marital distress was premarital relationship quality, whereas similarity factors generally had the weakest associations with marital quality and stability (Jackson 2009).

Several previous studies have examined the relationship between marital virtues and/or values on the one hand, and marital satisfaction, quality and/or stability on the other. Marriage is not an individual endeavour; it necessarily involves another person's well-being which makes it "an inherently moral experience" (Fawcett et al. 2013, p. 517). In an attempt to quantify marital virtues, Hawkins and colleagues developed the Marital Virtues Profile (Hawkins et al. 2006, 2007; Fawcett et al. 2013) and found a strong correlation between virtues and marital quality and satisfaction, as well as a modest negative correlation between virtues and depression (Hawkins et al. 2007). Focusing also on marital virtues, Carroll and colleagues (2006) offered a conceptual model of marital competence consisting of interpersonal and intrapersonal factors. The latter category included, among others, marital virtues which reflect the ability to have regard for others (Carroll et al. 2006). This concept, referred to as "other-centeredness", was defined as a "metaconcept that organizes the set of intrapersonal competencies that demonstrate an orientation toward other-importance, such as kindness, commitment, fairness, sacrifice, forgiveness, and other marital virtues" (Carroll et al. 2006, p. 1010). Using structural equation modelling, empirical support for their conceptual model was found in a sample of 750 couples where the partner's "other-centeredness" was the strongest predictor of relationship quality in women (Carroll et al. 2006). A subsequent study offering support for this model found that commitment and forgiveness explained a substantial amount of variance in the perceived levels of a partner's relationship self-regulation (Novak et al. 2018). In another study utilising structural equation modelling, Rosen-Grandon et al. (2004) found that love, loyalty, and shared values mediated the relationship between marital interaction processes and marital satisfaction, and that these effects were moderated by gender and length of marriage. A limitation of this work, however, is that the final model was a substantial modification of the originally hypothesised conceptual model which was not supported by the data. Similarity in values between partners was also associated with greater relationship satisfaction in the Israeli cultural context (Gaunt 2006), implying that partners who share a common value system tend to be happier. Veldorale-Brogan et al. (2010) found that marital virtues mediated the relationship between individual well-being and relationship adjustment while communication between spouses mediated the relationship between marital virtues and relationship adjustment. In a subsequent report, those who perceived their partner as more virtuous were more likely to turn toward them for support which, in turn, was associated with greater problem-solving efficacy (Veldorale-Brogan et al. 2013).

1.2.3. Romantic Love, Attachment, and Marital Quality

The concept of romantic love is perhaps the cornerstone of the Western conceptualisation of adult intimate relationships and marriage among laypeople and a topic of perennial interest to researchers and clinicians alike. Romantic love can be framed as "a biosocial process by which affectional bonds are formed between adult lovers,

just as affectional bonds are formed earlier in life between human infants and their parents" (Hazan and Shaver 1987, p. 511), a formulation based on Bowlby's (1973) and Ainsworth et al. (1978) attachment theory. This approach attempts to explain the process by which infant attachment bonds can be "translated" into adult romantic love.

Several influential theoretical frameworks view love as a multifactorial phenomenon. Hendrick and Hendrick (1986) in their empirical investigation of six basic love styles based on Lee (1973) "colours of love" typology classified love into Eros (passionate love), Ludus (game-playing love), Storge (friendship love), Mania (possessive, dependent love), Pragma (logical, "shopping list" love), and Agape (all-giving, selfless love) using factor analysis and showed that these constructs could be reliably measured and had good construct validity. This factorial structure of love styles was subsequently replicated by the same authors (Hendrick and Hendrick 1989) and they were shown to predict relationship outcomes by Davis and Latty-Mann (1987) who found that Ludus was negatively related and Eros and Agape positively related to relationship quality. The pattern of results was broadly supportive of Lee's theory. Jeffries (2000) conceptualised love as a multidimensional phenomenon comprising of five primary virtues (prudence, temperance, fortitude, justice, and charity) based on Aristotle's and Thomas Aquinas's writings on virtue and modern empirical research. In a theoretical framework for understanding the structure and dynamics of marital quality and stability, Jeffries (2002) formulated love as a dual phenomenon consisting of two basic dimensions: virtue and attraction. Empirical support for this classification was derived from factor analyses of survey data (Jeffries 2002).

Despite the apparent attractiveness of such multidimensional approaches, it is unclear whether the proposed multifactorial love scales measure what is commonly understood as love, rather than some mixture of love and concepts adjacent to it, including caring, companionship, support, friendship, lust, and excitement. An alternative view posits that love can be understood as a fundamental and indivisible value, or, alternatively, a virtue. The philosopher Comte-Sponville (1996) defines love as a virtue, and a central one at that: "to act morally means to act as though one loved" (p. 224). According to Rokeach (1973) influential research framework on human values, love is classified as a value which, in turn, is defined as "an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence" (Rokeach 1973, p. 5). The values an individual holds dear form a value system, "an enduring organization of beliefs concerning preferable modes of conduct or end-states of existence along a continuum of relative importance" (Rokeach 1973, p. 5). This approach will form the theoretical basis for the conceptualisation of love and other values in the present study.

1.2.4. Aims and Hypotheses

Having identified areas of relative strengths and weaknesses in the existing marital satisfaction literature, the aim of our research programme was to offer additional insights into the putative link between values and virtues on the one hand, and relationship satisfaction, quality, and stability on the other. Specifically, we hypothesised that love would be the value with the most significant associations with relationship stability and quality. To guide our research, we formulated the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 (H1). *Love is a key value in the value hierarchy of a marriage/intimate relationship.*

Hypothesis 2 (H2). *Love has a positive association with the stability of a marriage/intimate relationship.*

Hypothesis 3 (H3). *Love has a positive association with the quality of a marriage/intimate relationship.*

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Sampling Procedure

The study was approved by the Committee for Ethical Research, School of Advanced Social Studies, Nova Gorica, Slovenia. Data collection took place in the summer of 2016. We contacted target respondents via email who subsequently contacted other prospective respondents until the desired sample size was reached through snowball sampling. Of the 3107 individuals who accessed the online questionnaire on the Slovenian survey hosting website 1ka, 604 completed it (19% response rate). To eliminate the possibility of recall bias affecting previous (failed) relationships, we excluded all participants not currently married or in a relationship, thus removing answers from single persons (8.8%), widowers (0.2%) and those who were separated/divorced (6.5%). From here onwards, all analyses refer exclusively to those who were in a relationship (43.6%) or married (40.9%), which resulted in a final sample size of 511 respondents whose demographic characteristics are shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample.

Variable	Proportion of the Overall Sample (N = 511)
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	77.3%
Male	22.7%
<i>Age group</i>	
21–40	63.6%
41–60	31.0%
61 or older	5.4%
<i>Education (completed level)</i>	
Primary	1.0%
Secondary	24.6%
Three- or four-year college diploma	24.3%
University degree	38.0%
Masters or doctoral degree	12.1%
<i>Employment status</i>	
Employed	78.0%
Unemployed job seekers	12.1%
Unemployed and not seeking work	4.8%
Students	5.1%
<i>Household size (number of members)</i>	
1	1.0%
2	22.0%
3	30.0%
4	33.9%
5 or more	13.1%
<i>Mean net (after tax) household income</i>	EUR 1815 (USD 2152)

Respondents were better educated than the Slovenian general population where 22.7% of those aged 15 or over had completed primary school, 52.8% had completed secondary school, and 24.5% had completed third level education as of 2020 ([Republic of Slovenia Statistical Office 2021a](#)). In terms of income, for comparison purposes, the average gross salary in Slovenia was EUR 1.585 (EUR 1879) and the average net salary was EUR 1030 (EUR 1222) in 2016 when data collection for the present study took place. Per capita GDP purchasing power parity (PPP) was USD 33,936 in 2016 and USD 39,593 in 2020 ([World Bank 2021](#)) which places Slovenia at 89% of the average EU-27 per capita GDP PPP ([Republic of Slovenia Statistical Office 2021b](#)). Our respondents were therefore representative of educated, middle class adults living in this formerly socialist European country.

2.2. Measures

The online questionnaire included three sections:

Part A (Virtues and Values) was a scale measuring the importance of 21 virtues and 18 values on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (=not at all important) to 5 (=very important). The virtues part of the questionnaire was adapted from the Organisational Barometer Scale (Jelovac 2012) which was originally comprised of 25 virtues. For the purposes of family studies research, we removed four virtues not directly relevant to marital relationships. The values section of the scale was translated into Slovenian and slightly adapted from Rokeach (1973) values survey to improve clarity for the local audience (see Table 2 below for a full list of virtues and values). The internal consistency of Part A of the questionnaire was high (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.91$).

Table 2. Mean ratings of virtues and values.

Variable	Mean	SD
<i>Virtues</i>		
Reliability	4.70	0.55
Loyalty	4.67	0.58
Honesty	4.66	0.63
Fairness	4.64	0.59
Perseverance	4.42	0.67
Truthfulness	4.41	0.68
Tolerance	4.31	0.70
Cleverness	4.29	0.75
Seriousness	4.23	0.75
Communicativeness	4.19	0.70
Cooperativeness	4.17	0.69
Benevolence	4.16	0.72
Dilligence	4.15	0.80
Courage	4.15	0.79
Gratitude	4.11	0.81
Composure	4.09	0.72
Generosity	3.92	0.84
Deliberation	3.91	0.78
Wittiness	3.84	0.90
Temperance	3.75	0.84
Competitiveness	2.93	0.96
<i>Values</i>		
Health	4.76	0.58
Love	4.72	0.57
Family safety	4.65	0.64
Self-respect	4.60	0.60
Inner harmony	4.50	0.66
Friendship	4.48	0.68
Peace	4.48	0.70
Freedom	4.36	0.72
Salvation	4.18	0.70
Wisdom	4.18	0.73
Equality	4.13	0.84
Pleasure	3.87	0.83
National security	3.81	1.07
Comfort	3.71	0.73
Excitement	3.29	0.89
Power	3.09	0.96
Beauty	3.08	0.91
Social status	3.07	0.95

Part B (Marital Satisfaction) consisted of the 32-item long-form Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI; Funk and Rogge 2007). The CSI is a frequently used, reliable, and validated self-report measure of relationship satisfaction. In the original validation study (Funk and Rogge 2007) of over 5000 online participants utilising item response theory, the 32-item version had a high internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.98$) as did short-form versions with 16 or 4 items ($\alpha = 0.98$ and 0.94 , respectively). Marital satisfaction, a key construct in couples research, is most commonly measured using instruments that contain “surprisingly low amounts of information and relatively high levels of measurement error or noise” (Funk and Rogge 2007, p. 580). As a result, “the bulk of the relationship and marital literature is based on measures containing notably high levels of error variance or noise” (Funk and Rogge 2007, p. 580). Commonly used measures of marital satisfaction typically contain several communication items which often also serve as independent variables in marital therapy research, thus running the risk of spuriously inflating the results by creating a tautology whereby both the independent and dependent variables measure the same construct to some degree. The CSI was thus designed to measure marital satisfaction in a way that is relatively “uncontaminated” by communication items (Funk and Rogge 2007). In the present study, our Slovenian translation of the 32-item CSI showed satisfactory internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.86$).

Part C (Disputes and Conflicts) of the questionnaire contained items relating to the frequency of disputes over issues commonly encountered in a relationship (see Table 3 for item list) and the frequency of different types of partner conflict (e.g., constructive verbal disputes, verbal aggression, physical violence; see Table 4). The internal reliability of Part C was high ($\alpha = 0.85$).

Table 3. Factor analysis of partner disagreements regarding common relationship issues.

Item	Factor Loadings
	Factor 1 (Partner Disagreement)
Virtues or behavioural patterns (e.g., laziness, lust, anger)	0.704
Finances (e.g., lack of money, what to spend it on)	0.694
Time spent together	0.661
Parental duties (e.g., childcare)	0.657
Household chores (e.g., cooking, shopping, cleaning)	0.629
Relationship breakdown	0.585
Place of residence	0.512

Note. Extraction method: principal axis factoring.

Table 4. Factor analysis of types of partner conflicts.

Item	Factor loadings
	Factor 1 (Partner Aggression)
Aggressive incidents (e.g., throwing objects, breaking items)	0.860
Physical violence	0.672
Psychological violence (e.g., passive-aggressiveness)	0.617

Note. Extraction method: principal axis factoring.

2.3. Statistical Methods

The internal consistency (reliability) of the instruments was measured using Cronbach’s alpha. Data processing and hypothesis testing was carried out using *t*-tests, factor analysis, principal component analysis, Pearson’s correlation, and multiple linear regression analysis. Statistical analyses were carried out in SPSS 27.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA) and R (R Core Team, <https://www.R-project.org/>, accessed on 8 July 2021).

3. Results

The mean ratings of individual virtues and values are presented in Table 2 below. The results revealed the following virtues to be of highest personal importance to our respondents: reliability, loyalty, honesty, fairness, perseverance, truthfulness, and tolerance. Competitiveness was ranked last. As for values, respondents placed the following in the upper half of their value hierarchy: health, love, family safety, self-respect, inner harmony, friendship, and peace. The lowest ratings were assigned to comfort, excitement, power, beauty, and social status.

Next, we measured the frequency of different types of disagreements that occurred between partners in the past 12 months. Factor analysis showed that these variables loaded onto a single factor which we labelled partner disagreement (see Table 3 below). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was 0.9 and a statistically significant Bartlett's test showed that the data were suitable for factor analysis. The variable "Bad habit (alcohol, drugs, cigarettes, gambling)" was removed due to low factor loading. The partner disagreement factor explained 40.8% of the variance. We used the regression method for factor extraction.

We then used a factor analysis to examine the dimensionality of the group of questions relating to forms of conflict between partners (Table 4). The items were suitable for factorisation (KMO test of 0.67 and a statistically significant Bartlett's test). The variable "constructive dispute (as a form of partnership disagreement)" had a low factor loading and was thus removed from the analysis and used as a separate variable termed constructive dispute. The remaining items relating to psychological violence, aggressive incidents, and physical violence were subjected to factor analysis and the single extracted factor accounted for 52.4% of the variance. We used the regression method for factor extraction and labelled the factor partner aggression.

Finally, we measured relationship satisfaction. Most of the respondents reported being satisfied with their relationship with a mean rating of 4.7 ($SD = 1.1$) on a 6-point scale. A small percentage of participants (15.0%) were less satisfied, dissatisfied, or totally dissatisfied with their partner relationship.

Using a principal component analysis of items 2–25 of the CSI (excluding the first general item and the final seven items anchored with adjectives), we extracted two principal components which jointly explained 67.0% of the variance (see Table 5 below). The first component, labelled quality, explained most of the variance (61.3%) while the second component, labelled stability, explained an additional 5.7% of the variance. The items that were loaded on stability were: not being able to imagine the relationship ending and not being able to imagine someone else making you as happy as your chosen partner does.

Hypothesis Testing

As previously stated, we hypothesised that love would receive a high rating in the hierarchy of values in an intimate relationship. The results obtained showed that love ranked second in the value hierarchy. In addition, love was strongly associated with other values, including self-respect ($r = 0.56, p < 0.001$), internal harmony ($r = 0.49, p < 0.001$), health ($r = 0.47, p < 0.001$), and family safety ($r = 0.45, p < 0.001$). Based on these findings, hypothesis H1 was empirically supported.

Our second hypothesis posited that love would have a positive correlation with the stability of a relationship. Using a multiple linear regression analysis, we examined the effect of virtues and values on relationship stability. Only excitement ($\beta = 0.121, p = 0.030, r^2 = 0.01$) had a statistically significant effect on relationship stability, a construct previously created using a principal component analysis. Excitement, however, accounted for only 1% of the variance in relationship stability. H2 was therefore rejected.

Finally, we tested the third hypothesis which stated that love would have a positive association with relationship quality. Using a multiple linear regression analysis (Table 6), we found that love, family safety, comfort, and self-respect had a statistically significant effect on the relationship quality construct which was previously created using a principal

component analysis. Out of all the values, love had the strongest positive association with relationship quality, while self-respect was negatively associated with quality. The overall model was statistically significant but with these four explanatory variables, we could explain only 17% of the variance. Based on these results, H3 was empirically supported.

Table 5. Principal component analysis of relationship satisfaction.

Item	Component Loadings	
	Component 1 (Relationship Quality)	Component 2 (Relationship Stability)
11. relationship makes me happy	0.913	0.004
22. general satisfaction	0.911	0.024
12. warm and comfortable relationship	0.909	0.026
21. relationship met original expectations	0.897	0.003
24. enjoyment of partner's company	0.897	0.012
20. partner meets needs	0.893	0.018
16. perfect partner	0.885	−0.004
19. relationship is rewarding	0.881	0.084
8. would marry/be with same person again	0.869	−0.057
17. part of a team with partner	0.864	0.048
23. relationship is good compared to most	0.864	0.056
9. strong relationship	0.863	−0.013
7. strong connection with partner	0.828	0.037
25. having fun together	0.825	0.098
14. can confide in partner	0.783	−0.050
4. demonstrations of affection	0.782	0.062
5. things going well generally	0.757	0.051
6. regret getting into this relationship (R)	−0.732	0.253
3. making major decisions together	0.672	−0.032
15. second thoughts about relationship (R)	−0.616	0.282
10. wondering if someone else out there for me (R)	−0.597	0.313
2. time spent together	0.584	−0.044
13. cannot imagine relationship ending	0.202	0.776
18. cannot imagine another person making me as happy as partner does	0.136	0.733

Note. Principal component analysis with Varimax rotation. Two component solution for items 2–25 of the Slovenian translation of the Couples Satisfaction Index (Funk and Rogge 2007). Reverse-worded items are denoted with (R).

Table 6. Multiple linear regression analysis of the relationship quality.

Variable	b	SE	β	t	p	Overall Model		
						F	p	R ²
<i>Model 1: Relationship quality</i>						16.21	<0.0001	0.17
Constant	−3.54	0.51		−6.89	<0.0001			
Love	0.48	0.11	0.27	4.25	<0.0001			
Family safety	0.36	0.10	0.23	3.83	<0.001			
Comfort	0.21	0.07	0.16	2.96	0.003			
Self-respect	−0.26	0.11	−0.16	−2.40	0.017			

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The central aim of this study was to shed light on the link between values and virtues on the one hand, and relationship quality and stability on the other, in a previously understudied but geographically and numerically large cultural environment of Central and Eastern European societies contending with sweeping social, political and economic changes stemming from rapid liberalisation following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The sudden emergence of free markets, the elimination of price controls, the flood of Western consumer goods, and an overnight stark increase in personal and political freedoms, including being confronted with seemingly endless choices and possibilities, was a transitional “shock therapy” for the populations of these countries that has led to significant changes in their values and behaviour. This is likely reflected also in the sphere of relationships and marriage.

In a large sample of currently married individuals or those living in a committed romantic relationship, several key findings emerged. The values of love, family safety,

and comfort were positively associated with relationship quality while self-respect, an individualistic value, was negatively associated. These values explained a modest 17% of the variance in relationship quality. Only excitement had a significant positive association with relationship stability but the effect size was negligible. Love, therefore, played a significant role in an individual's subjective perception of relationship quality but was not associated with subjective estimates of relationship stability. It is noteworthy that a non-overlapping set of values correlated with the two relationship outcomes (quality and stability), outcomes that otherwise appear closely related. This may indicate that different ethical considerations come into play in an individual's evaluations of the various facets of their romantic relationship. The dual conceptualisation of love (attraction and virtue) by [Jeffries \(2002\)](#) helps explain why we found a differential pattern of associations for love and excitement: the latter contains elements of pleasure and sexual attraction, and it cannot be said to be the same thing as love. In a related development, a previous study found that an experimental increase in relationship excitement by means of a therapeutic intervention led to significantly higher levels of relationship satisfaction ([Coulter and Malouff 2013](#)). The study of marital values and virtues is therefore not of purely academic interest but may also have practical applications in marital therapy.

As reviewed in the Introduction, there is a growing body of empirical evidence showing associations between values, virtues, and marital outcomes. Despite this promising line of inquiry, this growing awareness has not yet been adequately reflected in the marital counselling and psychotherapy literature, despite obvious clinical implications. A systematic review and meta-analysis of 117 interventional studies concluded that important marital virtues such as commitment, sacrifice, and forgiveness have rarely been studied as clinical outcomes ([Hawkins et al. 2008](#)). The marital therapy literature has been characterised as having a "hegemonic focus" on communication skills ([Hawkins et al. 2008](#), p. 730). In a broad conceptual critique of the modern value-neutral practice of family therapy, [Fowers \(2001\)](#) notes that current psychoeducational approaches most commonly involve teaching clients communication and conflict resolution skills. Though perfectly in line with the contemporary cultural zeitgeist of proposing "technical solutions to almost any human problem", if we limit ourselves to technique while neglecting the importance of personal character strengths such as self-restraint, courage, generosity, justice, and good judgment, we run the risk of "los[ing] sight of other essential aspects of marriage" ([Fowers 2001](#), p. 328). This technocratic view of marriage therapy as a value-neutral endeavour makes it harder for clients "to identify and cultivate underlying character strengths necessary for good communication" ([Fowers 2001](#), p. 327). Unfortunately, raising these ethical and moral questions has encountered some resistance in the field of marital therapy as being "needless moralizing" ([Fowers 2001](#), p. 328). The insufficient attention being paid to epistemological questions in contemporary family research is also noted by [Barton and Bishop \(2014\)](#) who highlight a general lack of critical examination of underlying assumptions and paradigms embedded in this field and call for studying outcomes beyond individual happiness and self-esteem since these are "cultural ideals of political liberalism and liberal individualism" (p. 254). The strong focus in the marital satisfaction literature on individual happiness and satisfaction has been characterised as "ontological individualism", described as "a cornerstone of Western cultures that greatly value individual autonomy and emotional well-being" ([Fowers et al. 2016](#), p. 998). These valuable perspectives on the epistemological limitations of the current marital quality literature have informed our approach to studying virtues, values, and marital outcomes.

In terms of characterising the moral foundations of contemporary Slovenian society, it can be concluded that our respondents prioritised communitarian virtues, including loyalty, honesty, and fairness, over and above individualistic virtues such as competitiveness. Competitiveness, a virtue highly prized in Western capitalist societies and undoubtedly essential in the business world and public life in general—but potentially detrimental and strife-promoting in an intimate relationship—was rated conspicuously last. With respect to values, we found that value-ideals such as health, love, family safety, self-respect, inner

harmony, friendship, and peace ranked in the top third of the value hierarchy. Meanwhile, at or near the bottom of the pack, we found comfort, excitement, power, beauty, and social status. In short, several eudaemonic values received high endorsements while the more individualistic and hedonistic values obtained the lowest ratings. It should be emphasised that we offered our respondents a much more diverse palette of virtues and values to choose from than typically seen in the marital literature where a narrow range of marital virtues or values was preselected. We believe that our approach permitted individuals to select what truly matters to them and therefore did not constrain their answers with preconceived (often individualistic and liberal) notions.

How do our findings compare to other value surveys in our cultural milieu? In the most recent wave of the World Values Survey (2020), Slovenia had higher than average scores on secular-rational and self-expression values, placing it in the Catholic Europe cultural zone. In a recent representative sampling of public opinion in Slovenia ($N = 853$), Hafner-Fink et al. (2020), using a 10-point Likert scale, measured the importance of six values (ranked here in descending order of mean ratings): family (9.63), leisure time (8.79), work (8.65), friendship (8.48), politics (4.61), and religion (4.45). Though utilising different measures, we found some notable similarities, including the prioritisation of family and friendship. In a recent survey comparing Slovenian ($N = 208$) and Austrian ($N = 196$) managers, it was found that collectivist values were associated with democratic leadership in both countries, but the effect of collectivism was stronger in Slovenia (Nedelko and Potočan 2021).

4.1. Strengths and Limitations

Our study has several strengths, including the large sample size, the breadth of measurement of moral concepts, the use of reliable and valid outcome measures, and the anonymous survey design which is important in any research relating to morality and ethics to reduce social desirability bias, especially in a low-trust society such as Slovenia where generations of political repression and surveillance of the citizenry by the state security apparatus still affect the public consciousness which is reflected in typically low survey response rates. No study is without its limitations, however, and the same applies to the research presented here. Our sample was cross-sectional and there was an overrepresentation of women, college educated or higher, and inhabitants of the north-eastern Podravska region (which borders Austria and has a historically Germanic cultural influence). Another limitation is that a large majority of our respondents reported being satisfied with their relationship and/or marriage; therefore, our results mostly relate to what values and virtues are linked to a happy relationship rather than the correlates of a troubled relationship. We also obtained relationship quality ratings from only one member of the couple where it would have been preferable to include both members of the dyad. This was not possible, however, as it would have precluded us from carrying out the survey anonymously.

4.2. Conclusions and Future Directions

In summary, this study presents some novel findings from an understudied area of research: romantic relationships/marriage in post-socialist European societies. These observations are informative from the perspective of decades-long attempts to achieve a closer economic and political convergence between older, established Western EU member-states and the more recent additions from Central and Eastern Europe. Geographically and culturally, Slovenia is situated at the crossroads between the Balkans and Central Europe. The period of transition from socialism to a Western-style democracy has witnessed a rapid establishment of a new social order characterised by greater liberalism, individualism, and growing social and wealth inequality. Despite ostensibly being part of the liberal capitalist order for three decades now, and despite joining the system of formal Western alliances almost a generation ago, virtue and value hierarchies in Slovenia are, according to our findings, still largely collectivist. What this says about the prospects of achieving

full convergence between the “old” EU and the “new” states located in the ever-expanding eastern flank of the EU remains to be seen. These nations continue to face considerable challenges in attempting to converge with Western European economic and political systems following almost half a century of poverty, economic mismanagement, government corruption, and a lack of civil society. Future empirical research is warranted as these societies continue to evolve in an uncertain direction.

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