The Impact of Hearing Loss on Marital Relationships in Late Life

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    - Department of Speech-Language-Hearing
Significance

- Approximately 40 percent of those over the age of 65 have some degree of hearing loss.
- It has been estimated that the number of persons with hearing loss in the United States over the age of 65 years will reach nearly 13 million by the year 2015 (American Academy of Audiology, 2004).
- Hearing loss has potential consequences for marital relationships in later life.
Purpose

- To find out how hearing loss impacts marital relationships in late life

- To identify coping strategies used by married couples to deal with hearing loss
Impact of hearing loss

Chmiel & Jerger (1993)
- Individuals with hearing loss rated selves as less handicapped than did their significant others

Lormore & Stephens (1994)
- Significant others reported more negative consequences of their spouses’ hearing loss than their spouse
Impact of hearing loss

Stephens et al. (1995)

- Patients listed difficulties their spouses have as a result of their hearing loss
- Significant others listed difficulties they have because of spouses’ hearing loss
- S.O.’s listed psychosocial problems as more difficult, but patients listed them as less difficult for their S.O.’s
- Gender differences
Previous Research (Audiology)

- Anderson and Noble (2005)
  - Examined relationship satisfaction
  - Couples where person with hearing impairment rated their loss as more severe than their partner were more satisfied
  - Couples where the partner rated the loss more severe were less satisfied
Previous Research (Audiology)

- Preminger (2001)
  - 13 subjects attended AR classes with their S.O., 12 subjects attended classes on their own
  - Use of communication strategies increased and negative consequences of hearing loss decreased
  - Decrease of negative consequences was greater among those that attended classes with S.O.’s
Previous Research (Sociology/Gerontology)

- Wallhagen et al. (2004)
  - Longitudinal study
  - Self assessment of hearing loss, along with assessment of physical, psychological and social well being
  - As spouses’ hearing loss increased, partners had poorer physical/psychological/social well being
  - Gender differences
Previous Research
(Sociology/Gerontology)

Yorgason et al. (2006)

- Semi-structured interviews with couples
- Couples reported gradually accepting and finding meaning in their experience
- Despite experiencing hearing-related communication difficulties, most couples demonstrated good communication skills
Current Study

- Sociology/Gerontology perspective
- Qualitative analysis
- Differences from previous studies
  - Interviewed individuals separately
  - Explored coping strategies
Participants

- Recruiting
  - Speech Acoustics and Perception Laboratory participant pool (“Senior Ears”)
  - 13 couples were contacted; 7 participated
  - Participants ranged in age from 69 to 84 years ($M=76$)
  - Marital duration ranged from 5-10 years to 50+ years
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Hearing Loss</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>Mild mixed reverse cookiebite AD, WNL AS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matt</td>
<td>WNL AD, WNL except for moderate noise notch AS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>WNL AU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Mild-to-moderately severe loss &gt;2K AU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Moderate loss &gt; 2K AD, Moderate-to-severe loss &gt;1500 Hz AS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>Essentially WNL AU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny</td>
<td>* Mild loss at 500 sloping to moderately severe at 8K AU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bob</td>
<td>* Mild-to-moderate loss &gt;2K AU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>* Moderate loss &gt; 3K AD, Flat moderate loss AS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>* Mild loss at 250, sloping to severe loss at 6K AS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony</td>
<td>* Moderate essentially flat loss AU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathy</td>
<td>Mild loss at 250 sloping to moderate at 8K AU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>* Moderate-to-severe loss at 3K+ AU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>* Severe loss &gt;1K AU</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Data Collection

- Questionnaire
- Demographics
- Hearing status
- Marital relationship
Data Collection

- Semi-structured interviews
  - ~ 30 open-ended questions
    - Themes:
      - Relationship
      - Support and coping strategies
      - recommendations
- Interviews were recorded and transcribed
Analysis

Content analysis focused on three areas:

1. Problems related to hearing loss.
3. Recommendations for other couples experiencing hearing loss.
Additional Factors Considered

- Self rating of hearing status
- Spouse’s rating of their hearing status
- Degree of hearing loss
- Length of marital status
- Self rating of marital satisfaction
- Aural rehabilitation
  - Apart from hearing aids
Results: Types of Problems

- Difficulties carrying conversations in a noisy and crowded environment.
  - Mary: “I give up I just give up if he is sitting in the wrong side of me”

- Misunderstandings due to the hearing loss.
  - Matt: “Either I didn’t hear something she said or she didn’t hear something that I said, we’ve had times of miscommunications.”
Results: Types of Problems

- Watching television or listening to the radio together.
  - Cathy: “Well we can’t watch television together because it just drives me out of the room.”

- Annoyance when they continuously ask for things to be repeated.
  - Rose: “It’s constantly, What did you say? I didn’t hear that”!
Results: Coping Strategies

- Participants do have communication strategies to help them deal with hearing loss.
  - Facing each other
  - Changing seats
  - Asking for clarification
  - Staying in the same room
  - Eye contact and lip reading
Results: Coping Strategies

- Participants use sense of humor to cope with their hearing loss.
  - Jenny: “We laugh it out and then try to work it out.”

- Patience is important.
  - Terry: “If I could put patience in a bottle I would be rich.”
Recommendations

- Admitting that there is a problem and getting a hearing test.
- Obtaining a second opinion, and doing whatever it takes to find the right hearing aid.
- Jenny: “Just be patient, you get frustrated and you get annoyed with yourself but if you don’t want to get cut out of things you just really have to keep working at it”.
Additional Factors Considered

- Self rating of hearing status
- Spouse’s rating of their hearing status
- Degree of hearing loss
- Length of marital status
- Self rating of marital satisfaction
- Aural rehabilitation
Discussion

- Impact of hearing loss on marriage
- Couples in this study have developed successful coping strategies
- Those strategies can be used by other couples who haven’t yet adjusted to their or their spouse’s hearing loss
- There is a lack of knowledge regarding aural rehabilitation programs
Implications

- Hearing loss has negative consequences on marital relationships but these couples cope well with the problems.
- Educating older adults about aural rehabilitation services.
- Importance of providing services to couples and not just individuals.
Limitations

- Non-representative sample of married couples
- Many years since hearing loss
- Cross-sectional design
Future Research

- Recruit participants in initial stages of hearing loss
- Follow participants over time
- Compare couples who have received aural rehabilitation to those who have not
Questions?