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Marriage, a way to achieve relaxing evolution: A grounded theory investigation

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Abstract:

BACKGROUND: Marital satisfaction is a complex of feelings, which includes pleasure, satisfaction, and pleasure experienced by the husband or wife in all aspects of marriage, and it is an important part of individual health, especially mental health. This qualitative study was conducted to understand marital satisfaction using grounded theory on couples.

MATERIALS AND METHODS: This qualitative study was implemented using grounded theory based on Corbin and Strauss, 2008, to investigate the process of marital satisfaction formation among couples from 2014 to 2016. The sampling was started as purposeful and continued as theoretical. The data were obtained using semi-structured interviews. 28 interviews were taken from 25 participants; MAXQDA software was used to facilitate the organization of classes and subclasses.

RESULTS: The central variable of this study was called “toward a relaxing evolution.” On that account, the main classes included “supportive companionship” and “responsible love,” and variables of “personality traits,” “interactive relationships,” “economic status,” “passage of time,” and “present resources in society” provided the basis for the formation of marital satisfaction.

CONCLUSION: To achieve marital satisfaction, couples should set their family’s ultimate goal toward achieving a relaxing evolution for the entire family, and they should accompany each other in order to achieve that goal. This sometimes requires sacrifice and forgiveness to achieve the ultimate goal of the family.

Keywords:

Couples, grounded theory, marital satisfaction, marriage

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Introduction

Marital satisfaction provides an overall assessment of the current state of the relationship.^[1] It is also an adaptation between the present and the expected situation between couples. According to this definition, marital satisfaction exists when the state of marital relationship matches with the expected situation. Family psychology experts often evaluate the quality of marital relationships among couples according to marital satisfaction, because it is one of the most important factors in the progress and achievement of life objectives.^[2,3]

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Marital satisfaction is a complex of feelings, which includes pleasure, satisfaction, and pleasure experienced by the husband or wife in all aspects of marriage, and it is an important part of individual health, especially mental health.^[4] Furthermore, marital satisfaction is effective in mental and physical health, satisfaction from life, career success, and social communications. Since it is a protective factor against psychological damages due to the harmful events of life,^[5] it is recognized among the most important indicators of life satisfaction.^[6]

In Iran, most researches by social scientists have recognized these factors as affecting factors on marital mismatch and divorce

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in Iran.^[7] Recent studies show that divorce rates have increased in Iran in recent years. According to the latest reports from the civil registration organization, the ratio of marriage to divorce was 3.9 during the first 9 months of 2016 in Iran. This means that for every 3.9 marriages, one divorce has been registered. It should be noted that this ratio was 6 in 2011 (the occurrence of reduction in the marriage to divorce ratio).^[8] However, the official statistical reports of divorce do not fully reflect the spouses' failure to maintain healthy marriages, because a greater population of marriages with the status of emotional divorce are present which have not been registered. Perhaps emotional divorces are twice as registered divorces, in which individuals live shallow lives and there are families in which husband and wife live together with no mutual emotions, but they never ask for a legal divorce. This suggests that the lack of divorce in a family does not stand for family mental health and marital adaptation among couples, because in some countries, including Iran, divorce is not accessible simply due to cultural, traditional, and even legal issues. Therefore, many couples live in families of emotional divorce.^[9]

Regarding marital mismatch, it should be noted that a couple gets married to fulfill some of their needs and expectations. Each of the spouses attempts to increase their relationships with each other, so that they can achieve the most benefits of marriage with minimal efforts. Anyhow, if the benefits of the marriage are not in accordance with their expectations, or the efforts are more than the gains in the marriage, conflicts, and differences arise. In the early stages of a relationship (dating, engagement, and early marriage), conflicts between spouses may occur mostly because of silence (lack of expression of opposition) or withdrawal from the subject. Therefore, a gradual mismatch in the adaptation of couples initiates.^[10] On that account, understanding the mechanism of marital satisfaction can help couples to resolve conflicts among them and increase their satisfaction.

In the study of different research methods, in cases where the objective of the research is reviewing the process, the grounded theory research method is a proper method because it aims to study of the actions, behaviors, beliefs, symbols, and ideas of individuals and groups as they do in real life. Grounded theory is a process for generalizing the results of a particular observation to a more comprehensive theory. Therefore, this qualitative study was conducted to understand marital satisfaction using grounded theory on couples.

Materials and Methods

Study design

This qualitative study was implemented using a naturalistic model to investigate the process of marital

satisfaction formation among couples from 2014 to 2016. Since the formation of marital satisfaction occurs among couples through their social interactions with acquaintances and real environment and has a process nature, the grounded theory method was used to implement this project, which is suitable for understanding this process in a natural environment. The data analysis was performed using Strauss 2008 and Corbin software. After obtaining the necessary permissions, the participants were selected purposefully from women, and gradual reminders led the research team for theoretical sampling.

Participants

In this study, samples with rich information were selected to provide a reliable picture of the phenomenon under study.^[11] The criteria for entering the study included at least 3 years of marriage duration, living in the urban community of Tehran, being Muslim and Iranian with the ability to understand and speak Persian, being in the first marriage, and willingness to participate in the study. Samples were selected from university and hospital environments, as well as health centers and public spaces. The sampling was started as purposeful and continued as theoretical.^[12] Considering the purposeful method of sampling, in addition to the women, men, a family counseling expert, and a religious expert was also included in the study. The first participant of this study was one of the professors of the Department of Reproductive Health of Tehran Nursing and Midwifery Faculty who was selected due to a high level of knowledge in the field and proper power of expression. To maximize the diversity of samples, efforts were made to include participants in a wide range of ages, education levels, occupations, and a number of children. A total of 28 interviews were obtained from 25 participants [Table 1].

Data collection

The data were obtained using semi-structured interviews. The duration of the interviews was in the range of 45 min to 1.5 h. The location of the interview was determined by the participant either at the university, workplace, home, or public space. Participants were asked to express their general experience with marital satisfaction. Interviews started with public questions, and with the advancement of the interview, more specific questions were asked based on the obtained levels and considering the aim of the research. For instance, a sample of the questions included "When do you feel satisfied with your marital life?" "What increases marital satisfaction in your life?" "What have you done to increase your marital satisfaction?" "What sources did you use to help you resolve your satisfaction barriers?" and "Which resources did you find more effective in solving your problems?" According to the participant's response, proper questions

Table 1: Demographic traits of participant

<i>n</i>	Age	Sex	Level of education	Job status	Number of children	Year of marital life
1	37	Woman	Ph.D	University teacher	1	7
2	36	Woman	Student of Ph.D	Physician	2	12
3	44	Woman	Student of Ph.D	University teacher	1	16
4	33	Woman	Student of Ph.D	Physician	1	6
5	43	Woman	Secondary school	Nurse aid	2	27
6	40	Woman	Associate degree	Employee	2	22
7	45	Woman	Student of Ph.D	University teacher	2	22
8	28	Woman	Student of Ph.D	Housewife	0	3
9	28	Woman	Student of Ph.D	Housewife	0	3.5
10	24	Woman	Bachelor	Housewife	1	2
11	31	Woman	Diploma	Employee part time	1	5
12	50	Woman	Illiterate	Housewife	3	25
13	29	Woman	Diploma	Housewife	2	8
14	25	Woman	Diploma	Housewife	1	4.5
15	29	Woman	Diploma	Housewife	1	6
16	31	Woman	Diploma	Employee	1	3
17	37	Woman	Diploma	Housewife	2	20
18	32	Woman	Middle school	Housewife	2	12
19	36	Woman	Primary school	Housewife	2	22
20	45	Woman	Diploma	Housewife	3	30
21	43	Man	Ph.D	Religious expert	5	21
22	34	Man	Bachelor	Clerical	1	7
23	35	Man	Diploma	freelance job	1	7
24	38	Man	Middle school	guardian	2	13
25	30	Man	Ph.D	University teacher	0	3.5

were asked to resolve the ambiguity and complementary explanations were obtained. After completing each interview in the shortest time, it was transcribed word by word. Then, the written form of interviews was analyzed, and the information was used to prepare questions for the next interview. The researcher also used observational notes, field notes, and memo writings. The sampling continued until the data saturation was achieved, and codes and classes were completed, so no other new code was obtained from the data.

Data analysis

A three-stage process including open, axial, and selective coding was used to separate the words and phrases and discover the concealed meanings in them, as well as the relation between these concepts. In the subsequent interviews, the obtained codes were compared with each other and with previous interviews' codes to find similarities and differences, and codes were classified based on the common aspects.

Continuous comparative analysis was carried out through special analytical tools including questioning, analysis of words, phrases, and sentences, making comparisons within the classes, and comparing all classes from the outside, which prevented bias in analyzing and overcoming the barriers of data analysis. Analysis of data was carried out based on Corbin and Strauss approach,^[13] which included analyzing data for concepts, analyzing

data for background, entering the process to analysis, and composition of classes according to the central variable regarding to the main concern of participants, as well as the emergence of a basic theory. The explained structure was established in response to one of the main questions of research (what is the process of marital satisfaction formation?). In the next step, the obtained concepts were used to explain the background theory of the process of marital satisfaction formation, and classes were established according to the central variable and the main timeline was enhanced using reminders and diagrams to help the storytelling process. Finally, the resulting theory was promoted after being established and edited. MAXQDA software (produced by VERBI GmbH, Berlin, Germany) was used to facilitate the organization of classes and subclasses.

Rigor and ethics

In this study, rigor, credibility, dependability, and conformability were examined.^[13,14] Rigor and credibility of the data were created by constant collection and comparative analyzing of the data. In order to maintain rigor before the research, the literature was limitedly reviewed. For controlling, conformability member check and peer check, as well as the repeated review, was implemented. The present study was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee at Tehran University of Medical Sciences under the license number of 9121151007.

Results

In this study, 28 interviews were taken from 25 participants (20 women and 5 men), and the obtained data were used for analysis. The average age of women was 35.75 ± 7.61 years, and the average age of men was 36 ± 4.84 years. In addition, the average duration of marriage was 14.18 ± 9.27 years [Table 1]. The analysis of interviews, data of 5 field notes and about 62 reminders about the issue of study, circa 1254 cases of first level code (open code) were extracted without calculation of overlapping. Then, these codes were compared and classified according to the similarities and differences. The result of this classification was a total of 23 subclasses (including analysis for concept and analysis for background). With the progress of the research, analyzing of concepts went into more abstract levels, so that these concepts were recategorized based on the similarities and differences in concepts. Seven conceptual levels and a central variable resulted from this categorization. Finally, the obtained theoretical model is shown in Figure 1.

Toward a relaxing evolution (central variable)

Making efforts to achieve evolution in all aspects of life is a need that exists in most mentally healthy individuals. This nature motivates humans to overcome the shortcomings and defects of themselves in their lives. Marital life has a significant and important role in human life; therefore, efforts of couples to achieve a

relaxing evolution cannot be ignored. The traces of this concept are observed in all classes derived from concepts. Therefore, the central variable of this study was called "toward a relaxing evolution." On that account, the main classes included "supportive companionship" and "responsible love," and variables of "personality traits," "interactive relationships," "economic status," "passage of time," and "present resources in society" provided the basis for the formation of marital satisfaction.

Supportive companionship

When couples make marriage vows to each other, they basically become committed to supporting each other in life's challenges. That is why achieving satisfaction in marital life depends on the supportive companionship of the spouses. Understanding the needs of the spouse is of major importance on supportive companionship. In this case, the seventh participant said:

"Any problem I have, I know that there is someone there for me. A person who takes care of our children so I can run my errands. This feeling of support we have for each other is a very good feeling, I think this feeling goes beyond the purpose that people usually get married for."

Adaptation to different situations is a skill that should be created and strengthened in individuals. The conditions are not ever completely in the way we want, so individuals should have the ability to adapt to different situations of life. A number of participants mentioned adaptation to the culture and moral characteristics of the spouse's family as important adaptation issues. On the other hand, the participants also noted that they could never achieve marital satisfaction until they have pardoning ability toward their spouse's family. Not forgiving the mistakes of the spouse or his/her family will lead to a sense of grudge and hatred, which will affect the couples' satisfaction over time.

Responsible love

A unique feature of the relationship between couples is a sense of responsible love. This feeling is not merely loving each other, but it comes with a sense of responsibility toward the spouse, which is the result of supportive companionship between the couples. From the viewpoint of couples, the special position of responsibility for the duties he/she has in his/her marital life is indisputable in the formation of marital satisfaction. In this case, one male participant said:

"We can say that we are satisfied with our life when we perform our duty toward each other well, and these duties are legal, religious, ethical and customary duties, as husband or wife. I mean, as a spouse we do our duties right."

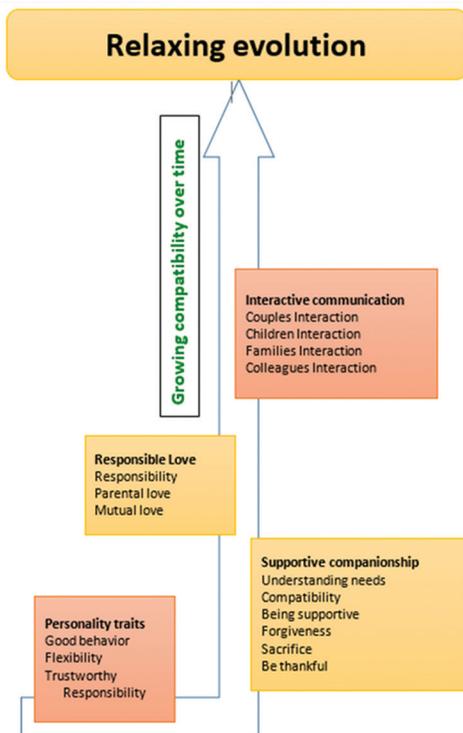


Figure 1: Marital satisfaction formation process model

Love for the child is both an intrinsic nature and a social value. In societies where having a child is valuable, it would be natural for couples to see one of the perfections of their marital life in having children and loving them. A number of participants believed that children are the fruits of marriage and couples should direct all their efforts toward the growth and development of their children. One male participant stated:

“When you have a kid in your life as a couple, you naturally ignore some of the issues that occur in your marital life for the sake of your children. Because children are the fruits of their parents’ lives and everything they have is for them.”

Personality traits

Participants were aware that they would have to try to establish a sincere relationship with each other in order to achieve marital satisfaction. To this purpose, they try to stay with each other as much as possible and to hear from each other throughout the day. They try not to get angry with each other and express their love for each other. These attributes do not merely include expressing the emotional feelings of love, but to tell honestly and timely of all hurting matters can help to strengthen the relationship between couples. One of the gentlemen stated:

“We did not let anything get old in our marriage so that it could have a chance to ruin our lives. We would just say how we felt in the first place, if there was any hard feelings or angeriness, we would tell each other about it in the right time so that we could resolve our problems.”

Social interactions

These interactions include the interactions between couples, the interaction of couples with their own families and their spouses’ families, the interaction of couples with their children, and their interaction with colleagues. Interactions between couples basically involve both sexual and non-sexual relationships. Participants of this research recognized sexual relations as one of the main indicators of the marital relationship and the cause of affection among couples.

“Sexual intercourse can be very effective in my relationship with my husband, and even with my children and our families. It is an instinct, and it must be fulfilled.”

Non-sexual relationships of couples include verbal and nonverbal communication, spending leisure time, and so on, and it generally involves all dimensions of interactions. If couples fail to have a progressive nonsexual interaction with each other, they will encounter many challenges in their relationships over time, leading to the insecurity of their marital life.

Passing of time

There is a variation in the time required for the formation of optimal interaction between couples in different families. By passing of time, the knowledge of couples increases from each other, which makes them adaptable. In addition, it makes them able to understand their strengths and weaknesses and prevent conflicts and arguments.

“The 1st years after marriage, all your energy is spent on finding the strengths and weaknesses of your spouse and knowing his sensitivities on different issues. When someone gets married, they love their spouse for the sake of marriage. This love becomes deeper in time, meaning that you love your spouse with all his qualities, and this is achieved in the shadow of this cognition, which is more real love.”

The economic status

All participants agreed that economic status is one of the most important factors affecting marital satisfaction. This factor affects marriage satisfaction through direct and indirect pathways by causing arguments, suppression of self-esteem, and a sense of frustration. The culture, tradition, and religion of the Iranian society are on the basis that the financial capability of the husband is the core factor for creating satisfaction from marital life. Husband’s financial capability directly affects the evolutionary process of marital satisfaction through providing financial needs, and indirectly by the enhancement of his self-esteem and encouraging to do his responsibilities. A participant mentioned the state in which the husband cannot provide the economic needs of his family and has to get help from others and said:

“A man must be financially capable of providing for his marital life, which means that he should be able not to ask others for help. For example, he should not ask his parents to fulfill the economic needs of his family, because this will lead them to a state in which they expect us to live according to their will.”

The role of society

Couples acknowledged the role of using community resources, such as guide books, films and educational programs of TV, radio, and websites, as well as role models such as parents and family counselors in achieving marital satisfaction.

“They do not educate us with the facts of life in any stage before marriage. I think that we should not be an idealist about life because the realities of life are different from our dreams, and this is often frustrating and depressing after entering marital life.”

Regarding marital satisfaction and ways to achieve a successful marriage, several religious and psychology

books are available on the market. However, the importance of studying them is not taken into account at any stage of the growth and development of children. On the other hand, the effect of educational programs provided by the public media and the Internet is very important in developing marital satisfaction.

Discussion

The findings of this research are conceptualized in seven classes. One of these classes is “supportive companionship” that addresses the importance of understanding needs, adaptation, supportiveness, forgiveness, sacrifice, and gratitude of couples toward each other. The second class is “responsible love,” which addresses the responsibility, the emergence of parental love, and the mutual love of couples. In addition, analyzing the context of the study revealed other classes including “personality traits,” “social interactions,” “passage of time,” “economic status,” and “community roles.”

The findings of the present study showed that if couples consciously ignore each other’s mistakes, they would certainly see its positive result in their marital relationships. Forgiveness is a trait that facilitates achieving relaxation. Gordon *et al.* stated that forgiveness in marriage means less blaming of the spouse, more understanding of the spouse, and being less angry by his/her mistakes, and the forgiving person experiences the emotional sense of inner peace.^[15] Fincham *et al.* stated that forgiveness is an important predicting indicator of how couples will control future life conflicts.^[11] Researchers believe that the ability to forgive the spouse, especially through solving conflicts, leads to increased marital satisfaction.^[12,16]

Participants in this research believed that the dominating feeling in a satisfying relationship is based on mutual love. The induction of a sense of loving and being loved by the spouse is a process that must continue throughout the entire life to guarantee marital life. Researchers believe that one of the positive changes that occurred in the twentieth century was the focus on expressing emotions in marital life.^[17] Madanian and Hafidz conducted a qualitative study in Malaysia and concluded that there are three main themes including financial, intimacy and commitment issues. They recognized intimacy between couples as an affecting factor on marital satisfaction.^[18] In fact, expressing emotions has a major role in happiness and the continuity of marital life, and happy couples consistently express feelings such as love and affection toward each other.^[19]

In the present study, the findings showed that childbirth is a double affecting factor on marital satisfaction.

Reviewing previous studies also confirms our findings. Twenge and Foster believed that the birth of the first child is a significant challenge for couples because it evolves their relationship from a paired relation to a family of three or more. This transition can affect the family system in a positive or negative way. The positive impact includes the experience of marvelous pleasure in having a newborn baby, and the negative effect on couples includes experiencing fatigue, lack of time for themselves, disagreements on issues related to child care, and dividing family tasks.^[20] However, a number of studies have found contradictory results with previous findings. For example, Onyishi *et al.* reported a positive relationship between the number of children and marital satisfaction and concluded that this positive relationship is because of the culture of the Nigerian community, and the cause of the negative relationship observed in previous studies, is the culture of western societies.^[21]

The results of the present study showed that interactive communication between couples is very effective in their satisfaction and attitude toward marital life. Researchers believe that marriage is the source of some of the deepest human feelings and emotions such as love, hatred, anger, fear, discomfort, and pleasure.^[19] A satisfying marriage provides a good context for interaction and exchange of feelings and positive emotions between couples. Therefore, it is natural that having the ability to understand and accept the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of each other in marital life is associated with higher marital satisfaction.^[22,23]

A sexual relationship forms a significant part of the couples’ interactions. Participants acknowledged that having satisfaction with this aspect of the relationship has a significant impact on their marital satisfaction. As well, researchers believe that sexual satisfaction is one of the most affecting factors on marital satisfaction.^[24,25] Almost all participants acknowledged the important effect of passing time on marital satisfaction. The findings of the researchers are contradictory in this regard. Zainah *et al.* stated that satisfaction increases over time. He and some other researchers believe that couples who have lived together for more than 10 years have gone through the period of adaptation and experience less psychological stress.^[16,26,27] Furthermore, Duncan reported that marital satisfaction increases along with the increment in marriage duration.^[27,28] However, the study of Madanianan *et al.* (2013) showed that the highest satisfaction was observed in individuals with 1-4 years of marriage duration.^[29] Several researchers believe that most married people experience the highest level of marital satisfaction at the beginning of their marriage.^[30-32] However, Oprisan and Cristea found in their study that marital satisfaction does not have a correlation with the length of the marriage, but other

factors such as self-esteem and the ability of couples to communicate can help to achieve a durable and satisfactory marital life.^[33] The study of Aghapour *et al.* showed that there is no significant relationship between the duration of marital life and marital satisfaction.^[34]

It is always difficult for people to articulate issues related to marital life (as a sensitive topic), and the conduction of what is understood by the individual in marital life strongly depends on the desire to express and the ability of expression. In order to form good communication skills the environment should be safe and immune to interview and communicate mutually and friendly.

Conclusion

The results of the present study showed that the concept of marital satisfaction is a multidimensional concept that is strongly influenced by the context. According to the findings of this study, the concept of marital satisfaction is individualized for each couple, so that, while presenting a general definition of it may be possible, the real understanding of it is done by every individual. In addition, the path to marital satisfaction is influenced by individual and interpersonal factors, as well as factors related to family, community, time, etc., and each of these factors has its own preventive and facilitating dimensions. Thereby, in order to achieve marital satisfaction, couples should set their family's ultimate goal toward achieving a relaxing evolution for the entire family, and they should accompany each other in order to achieve that goal. This sometimes requires sacrifice, and forgiveness to achieve the ultimate goal of the family. In this regard, families of couples, children, family counselors, reproductive health experts, and religious counselors can be very helpful and have a significant impact on achieving marital satisfaction.

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Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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