

# The Effect of Couples' Interaction on Their Marital Satisfaction: A Qualitative Study

Zeinab Tavakol<sup>1,2</sup>, Parvin Yadollahi<sup>3</sup>, Maryam Shirmohammadi<sup>1\*</sup>, Akram Karami Dehkordi<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract--- Introduction:** A healthy family is a family in which, people have a healthy growth and have a normal interpersonal relationship. This study aimed to determine the effect of couples' interaction on their marital satisfaction among Iranian couples. **Materials and Methods:** A qualitative study using a conventional content analysis approach was used. Semi-structured interviews with 20 participants were conducted by purposive sampling. All of the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. Using MAXQDA software, the data were categorized and the main themes and sub-themes were extracted. **Results:** Data analysis revealed three themes of "couples' empathic interaction", "social interaction", and "family influence". The theme of couples' empathic interaction consisted of two sub-themes of sexual and non-sexual interaction. The theme of social interaction consisted of two sub-themes of interaction with children and interaction with colleagues, and the theme of family influence consisted of two sub-themes of supportive family and interfering family. **Conclusions:** The results showed that, by empathetic interaction, improving social interactions and proper use of family influence, we can help couples to achieve marital satisfaction. Providers of consultancy services to couples should learn about the influence of families on couples' life, and give them appropriate counseling and advice to improve their interaction and increase their independence from their families.

**Keywords---** Couples' interaction, Marital satisfaction, Qualitative study

## I. INTRODUCTION

Family is the core of society and is a place for growth and development. A healthy family is a family in which, people have a healthy growth and have a normal interpersonal relationship. It means that, family members have harmonious relationships with each other and treat each other with respect (1). In fact, the family is the main and unique social institution, and health and success of the society depend on their health and satisfaction, because the relationship (both positive and negative) that exists in the family is deep and everlasting unlike any other relationships. Also the performance of family members at different level, individual, pair and entire family, and the effect of this performance on other members of the family in verity of fields such as, education, employment, social interaction, etc. can be seen (2).

One of the most important factors in the success and sustainability of the family is marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction happens when the current situation of marital relationship is consistent with the expected situation. For

<sup>1</sup> Department of Reproductive Health and Midwifery, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Shahrekord University of Medical Sciences, Shahrekord, Iran

<sup>2</sup> Department of Reproductive Health and Midwifery, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Tehran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Iran

<sup>3</sup> Department of Midwifery, Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran

\* **Corresponding author:** Dr. Maryam Shirmohammadi, Department of Reproductive health, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Shahrekord University of Medical Sciences, Rahmatieh, Shahrekord, Iran. Email address: shirmohamadi.maryam@yahoo.com

family psychologists, level of marital satisfaction is considered as one of the criteria for evaluating the quality of marital relationship, because marital satisfaction is one of the most important factors that affect progress and achieving life goals and is affected by couple's emotional stability (3, 4). In fact, the marriage will be successful when the couple has a sense of satisfaction from each other (5). Studies have shown that, families in which husband and wife are satisfied with each other and have a sense of marital satisfaction, have a better performance and play their roles better (4). In other words, one of the aspects of a marital system is the sense of satisfaction that couples experience in their relationships (6). Thus, marital satisfaction plays a major role in the stability of marriage (7, 8).

Research results have illustrated that; divorce rate in Iran has increased compared to previous years. According to the latest statistic of Civil Registration Organization in Iran, the ratio of marriage to divorce in Iran in 2016 was 3.9. This means for every 3.9 marriages, one divorce has been recorded. It must be mentioned that, this ratio in 2011 was 6 which indicates that, in that year there were less marriages compared to divorce (9). Therefore, the need was felt to explore the effect of couples' interaction as an influential factor on their marital satisfaction, in order to determine practical strategies to stabilize family coherence by creating a deep understanding in this area. According to previous studies conducted on this field, and considering the need for deeper understanding in this area, authors of this study, in order to find answer to the question: "Does couples' marital satisfaction is affected by their interaction?" conducted a qualitative study aimed to determine the effect of couples' interaction on their marital satisfaction.

## **II. METHODS**

### **Design**

A qualitative study based on conventional content analysis approach was used. Qualitative research aims at improving our understanding and description the human experiences (10). Content analysis is a systematic coding and categorizing approach that can be used to explore a large amount of textual data with the aim of determining communication patterns and trends (11).

### **Data collection and analysis**

The criteria for entering the study included at least 3 years of marriage duration, living in 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. 20 Participants were selected by purposive sampling method with the consideration of maximum variation in sampling in terms of the length of marriage, having the child, the education level and employment status. Semi-structured interviews were held in the private atmosphere without the presence of their partner or any member of their family. The mean time of interviews was 55 minutes. The questions included:

1. How is your relationship with your spouse?
2. How is your relationship with your children?
3. What role does your interaction with your family play in your marital satisfaction?
4. What are the effects of your workplace and your relationship with your colleagues on your marital satisfaction?

The data was gathered from the beginning of winter 2014 until the end of autumn 2016. The interviews were performed in Persian at first and then translated to English. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the data

collections were analyzed simultaneously. The transcriptions were classified into compressed semantic units. Then codes were extracted from the semantic units. In order to categories and subcategories, the codes were sorted based on their similarities and differences and finally Themes developed as internal text concept.

### **Rigor and Ethical considerations**

Reliability and credibility was obtained through member checking, prolonged engagement with the participants. This article was one part of the first author's PhD dissertation that approved the study's proposal and supported financially by Tehran University of Medical Sciences (With ethical code: IR.TUMS.REC.1393.3). Participants were all informed of the objectives and process of study.

### **III. RESULTS**

Demographic traits of participants are shown in table 1. Data analysis revealed three themes of "couples' empathic interaction", "social interaction", and "family influence" (table 2). The theme of couples' empathic interaction consisted of two sub-themes of sexual and non-sexual interaction. The theme of social interaction consisted of two sub-themes of interaction with children and interaction with colleagues, and the theme of family influence consisted of two sub-themes of supportive family and interfering family.

**Table 1: Demographic traits of participant**

No	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

**Table 2: Theme and sub-themes.**

Theme	Sub-theme
<i>Couples' empathic interaction</i>	- Sexual interaction - Non-sexual interaction
<i>Social interaction</i>	- Interaction with children - Interaction with colleagues
<i>Family influence</i>	- Supportive family - Interfering family

### **Couples' empathic interaction**

#### **Sexual interaction**

The couples referred to sexual relation as one of the pillars of the marital relationship that creates love and affection between the husband and wife. The importance of sexual relation slightly varies for men and women. It seems that, sexual relation is more important for men compared to women. The third participant who was a 44 years old woman with 16 years history of married life, in regard to the importance of sexual relation in marital life stated:

*"Sexual relation can significantly affect my relationship with my husband and my children. It can affect the relationship between our families. It has an unconscious effect on my concentration, progress, relationship with my children, or husband. It is an instinct and this need must be met."*

#### **Non-sexual interactions**

Non-sexual interaction among couples included; conversation, verbal and nonverbal communication, spending leisure time, etc., and in fact, included all non-sexual relations among couples. If couples are incapable to form an appropriate relationship between each other, they will face many challenges in their relationship over time, which destabilizes their marital relationship. One of the participants, who had problem with her husband over having children, stated that:

*"Usually when we feel we are going to have a problem in our life, we talk to each other to explain at least I did not want to upset you, or for instance, you thought I have lost interest in you, no, this was not the case. This is the nature of becoming a mother, as your full attention will be diverted to your child."*

#### **Social interactions**

##### **Interaction with children**

Couples referred to children as a result of marriage, and a common interest. So, since each of the partners had an interest in his/her child, the interaction of other partner with the child affect his/her sense of marital satisfaction. Seeing a compassionate and supportive behavior of spouse towards their child, increases the sense of marital satisfaction in his/her partner.

*“...When I see my children are happy with their father, the way they talk with each other just like friends, and when I see he has a good relationship with the children ... and he cares for them, I become satisfied.”*

### **Interaction with colleagues**

One aspect of couples' interaction was their interaction with their colleagues in the workplace. According to the participants, women are affected by this interaction more than men. Acquiring the skills to control the interaction and capabilities not to bring home the workplace issues were among the concerns mentioned by majority of the participants. One of the female participants in this regard said:

*“When I go to work and my colleagues greet me with smile and communicate with me, it affects me. When my colleague tells me good morning, it gives me a lot of energy. But when, they behave badly..., I mean, the interaction I have at workplace that can affect my feelings influences my marital relationship. Generally, burnout and stresses at workplace have a significant affect.”*

### **Family influence**

#### **Supportive family**

Support that families give to couples encompass emotional, financial and social aspects. Couples referred to positive role of families in issues such as marriage disputes, couple's finances and the care of a newborn child. They even believed that, being respected by their families in the absence of any other support is a form of effective support. One of the participants in this regard said:

*“When the family of my husband respects me, it affects my attitude even my attitude towards my husband. It makes me feel that, I must get closer to my husband, which is a nice feeling.”*

Love and affection that families have towards couples and vice versa results in consolidation of couples' relationship and improves their marital satisfaction.

#### **Interfering family**

Couples participating in this study denied the interference of their families in their lives, and believed that, family interference plays a destructive role in the stability of couples' relationship. One of the participants in regard to the interference of her own family in her life stated:

*“Right at the time when I am angry with the situation but I think I should to go back to my life and build my life, the families play an important role, for example, they say, do not go back, don't do that, or you are an educated person. I have seen this in my own family and my husband's.”*

## **IV. DISCUSSION**

Data analysis revealed three themes of “couples' empathic interaction”, “social interaction”, and “family influence”. The theme of couples' empathic interaction consisted of two sub-themes of sexual and non-sexual interaction. The second theme of social interaction consisted of two sub-themes of interaction with children and interaction with colleagues, and the theme of family influence consisted of two sub-themes of supportive family and interfering family.

In this regard, some studies showed that, strong communication skills (12, 13) and romantic interaction (14, 15) are associated with higher marital satisfaction. Shapiro et al (2005) study showed that, lack of communication skills

in couples is another risk factor for achieving sexual satisfaction. Therefore, this must be considered in the couples' empowerment programs. They believed that, increasing communication skills increases couples' adaptability and parenting capabilities (16).

Families of the couples are the role model for them in determining the norms, beliefs and values related to the relationships and thus, can play an important role in achieving satisfaction from a relationship and its stability. The participants in this study referred to the role of families in their satisfaction. For them, the positive effect of family on the couples' marital satisfaction takes place when their families financially and emotionally support them, or help them in childcare, with one condition that, in decision making, families' interference should not cross a certain line and in fact, they should let the couples to make decision about their life independently. In this regard, Vil (2015) in a study found that, receiving support from family and giving support to friends improve marital satisfaction, while, a negative interaction with the family and emotional support lead to marital satisfaction in women (17).

Since marital relationship is not only limited between the couples but also affected by the children, participants in this study referred to their spouses' relationship with their children as a factor that has a significant impact on their marital satisfaction. On the other hand, a satisfactory marital relationship is the basis of family performance and directly or indirectly improves the child-parents and parent-parent relationships and leads to growth and adaptability of the children.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

The results showed that, by empathetic interaction, improving social interactions and proper applying of family influence, we can help couples to achieve marital satisfaction. Providers of consultancy services to couples need to understand the interaction between couples and how they should interact with their children, colleagues and all those around them. They should also learn about the influence of families on couples' life, and give them appropriate counselling and advice to improve their interaction with each other and empower them to become more independent from their families.

## **VI. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This research was doctoral dissertation on first author so approved and financially supported by Tehran University of Medical Sciences (Grant number: 9121151007). We thank all participants who cooperated with us in this study.

## **VII. COMPETING INTERESTS**

The authors declare no competing interests.

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