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A Review of the Factors Associated with Marital Satisfaction

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Abstract

Marital satisfaction is one of the common concepts used for assessing happiness and stability in a marriage. It is a multidimensional concept that is affected by several factors. The aim of this study was to review factors influencing marital satisfaction or dissatisfaction. A search through academic electronic databases, including PubMed, ScienceDirect, MEDLINE (Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online), Scopus, Wiley Online Library, Cochrane Library, Google Scholar, and Iranian databases in the period from 2000 to 2015, yielded 250 scientific papers. Related keywords that were used included marital satisfaction, marriage satisfaction, marital adjustment, and couple satisfaction. After reading the titles, 80 papers that satisfied the criteria for inclusion were selected. In general, 80 papers that were eligible to enter the study were reviewed. Following the review of papers, factors deemed to have considerable influence on marital satisfaction were identified as follows: demographic specifications, personality attributes, attachment style, relationship, communication and intimacy, couples' families, forgiveness and sacrifice, religion, emotional intelligence, personal health, and sexual relations (sex). Family counselors and therapists can benefit from these results to obtain a deeper perception of the foundations of married life and eventually, to help decrease the high divorce rate. Thus, conducting research on marital satisfaction to provide evidence for effecting a management strategy as well as to provide recommendation is indispensable. [GMJ.2017;6(3):197-207] DOI:10.22086/gmj.v0i0.641

Keywords: Marriage; Marital Status; Personal Satisfaction; Couples Therapy

Introduction

Marital satisfaction is one of the common concepts used for assessing happiness and stability in a marriage. In fact, what is even more important than the marriage itself is the success of marriage and satisfaction

of married couples [1]. Hawkins has defined marital satisfaction as a sense of happiness, satisfaction, and joy experienced by the husband or wife when they consider all aspects of their marriage. It is also one of the most important indicators of life satisfaction and family performance. Marital satisfaction is a

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process that comes into existence in the life of couples because it requires compliance with tastes, knowledge of personality attributes, establishing rules of behavior, and formation of relationship patterns. Because marital relationship is the primary source of social support for most couples and acts as a protective factor against both psychological and physiological affliction, marital satisfaction affects physical and mental health, life satisfaction, success in work, and social communication [2]. Although research on the factors that influence marital satisfaction started around 1950, it flourished in the 1990s and has been continuing till date. According to numerous studies, marital satisfaction is a multidimensional concept that is affected by many factors, including age at marriage, duration of marriage, ethnicity, personal characteristics, mental maturity, way of thinking, perception of one's own self and others, expectations of life, emotional intelligence of the couple, communication and problem-solving skills, religious beliefs, mutual understanding and respect, affection and love, attachment to each other, intimacy, trust, commitment, loyalty, educational status, family's financial situation, economic factors, cognitive and emotional factors, physiological factors, behavioral patterns, social support, violence, sexual function, physical attractiveness, presence of children, parenting style, relations with relatives and friends, how leisure time is spent, marital conflict, stress, and many other factors at the individual and social level [3-9]. Studies in Iran showed that the divorce rate is increasing. Marriage/divorce ratio in Iran was 4.2 (in 2015), which means that one divorce was registered per 4.2 marriages [10].

One of the reasons for divorce is marital dissatisfaction. Reviewing influential factors on marital satisfaction is important because marital satisfaction is an important aspect of an individual's health [11]. Therefore, by understanding the factors related to marital satisfaction in couples, it is possible to help them improve their perception about marital life as well as increase their chance of success via planning for effective management [12, 13]. Thus, this study aims to review the factors related to marital satisfaction in couples.

Search Strategies

The current review focuses on the factors influencing marital satisfaction. A search through academic electronic databases, including PubMed, ScienceDirect, MEDLINE (Medical Literature Analysis and Retrieval System Online), Scopus, Wiley Online Library, Cochrane Library, Google Scholar, and Iranian databases in the period from 2000 to 2015, yielded 250 scientific papers. Related keywords used for searching included marital satisfaction, marriage satisfaction, marital adjustment, and couple satisfaction. After reading the titles, 80 papers that satisfied the inclusion criteria were selected. Inclusion criteria were as follows:

1. Papers (Full text/Abstract/Review) published in English and Persian
2. The coordination between papers and research purpose

Though numerous studies on marital relationships exist, the authors were only interested in studies related to the influential factors on marital satisfaction in ordinary situations. Thus, other related studies that had been conducted under special circumstances were excluded.

Results

In general, 80 papers that were eligible to enter the study were reviewed. Following the review of papers, influential factors on marital satisfaction were identified as follows:

1. Demographic Specifications

1.1. Age

Several studies have shown that couples' marital satisfaction can be influenced by age [14, 15]. As age increases, marital satisfaction decreases [14, 16], which might explain why middle-aged couples report more marital problems than young couples [15]. It should be noted that elderly couples compared with middle-aged couples have fewer problems in their relationships [17]. Perhaps the decline in marital satisfaction in middle-aged couples is due to an increase in couples' responsibilities, birth of children, and financial problems associated with raising children.

Thus, in old age when children leave home, an increase in marital satisfaction is seen [18].

1.2. Age Gap Between the Couples

It seems that the age difference can be a major factor with regard to understanding and sexual activities of couples and could therefore affect marital satisfaction [19]. However, there is no consensus among the researchers to determine the right age gap between couples. Some researchers suggest five years of gap and others less than three years [20]. However, in general, if the age gap between couples is less than ten years, compared with more than ten years, marital satisfaction is higher [21]. One reason for the decline in marital satisfaction with increasing age difference between couples might be that with increasing age, sexual desires will change and the spouses expect different sexual activities from each other, and this resulting mismatch of sexual activity creates areas of dissatisfaction among couples who have a wider age gap [22]. However, some researchers did not find any statistically significant relation between these two variables [23]. The age difference between spouses cannot be generalized. In other words, it cannot be expected from all cultures and communities that wives should always be younger than husbands.

1.3. Level of Education

Some studies have shown that educational attainment is associated with marital satisfaction and has been recognized as a predictor of marital satisfaction [14, 24-26]. A study in Malaysia showed that more educated couples experienced a higher degree of marital satisfaction and better mental health compared with less educated couples [27]. This finding is justified by improved social functioning of highly educated people compared with the less educated ones. In fact, when couples are better educated, they have a better understanding of the realities of life, which makes them better equipped to solve their problems and avoid conflicts [18]. It is expected for couples with higher educational levels and improved social skills to have fewer problems related to marital satisfaction. Furthermore, lack of education can lead to disagreement or even divorce [28]. However, according to some studies,

educational level does not have a significant influence on marital satisfaction [29, 30].

1.4. Duration of Marriage

Most people who get married have a high level of marital satisfaction at the beginning [31]. However, over time, their satisfaction decreases. The negative correlation of marriage duration and marital satisfaction has been seen in some studies [16, 32]. However, some studies, including the study of Duncan (2008) and another researcher, showed that with increasing years of married life, marital adjustment increases [33, 34]. The researchers believe that couples who have been together for ten years or more have passed the adaptation period and have fewer psychological problems and stress [25, 35].

1.5. Income and Economic Status of the Family

Studies have shown that the economic situation and family income are associated with marital satisfaction [26, 34]. Research indicates that low income and job insecurity (especially for men) is associated with lower marital satisfaction. When couples have to worry about money constantly, their marital satisfaction will decrease [36]. Couples, who have a higher income than those who have lower incomes, experience greater marital satisfaction. However, other studies have not shown any relationship between the level of income and marital satisfaction [29], or even, have shown an inverse correlation between them. As the economic status increases, marital satisfaction decreases [37].

1.6. Presence of Children

The presence of children in different ways can have both positive and negative effects on the family system. Parents' sense of happiness and pride can be positive effects, whereas sense of tiredness, lack of personal time, and disagreement over childcare and homework can be negative effects. These issues can affect the quality of the relationship between couples [38]. Positive effects of the presence of children and marital satisfaction can be assured by fertility in case of women, who recognize their ability to successfully complete their biological and psychological roles and

social function largely through their ability to be a mother [39], since in many couples, not being able to have their biological child is considered as a defect [40, 41]. However, according to some studies, the presence of children or the increase in the number of children could lead to fewer opportunities for communication between couples, increase in parents' responsibilities, depression, and anxiety, which in turn adversely impacts marital satisfaction [15, 42]. Although, in their study, Onyishi *et al.* did not find this negative relationship, they showed that the number of children is a significant predictor of marital satisfaction [43]. A study in Japan showed that even having a male child could also have an impact on marital satisfaction [23].

2. Personality Attributes

In general, character represents those personal characteristics that demonstrate one's fixed pattern of behavior [44]. In fact, marriage is the union of two characters where the spouses, each with a distinct developmental background, personality style, and a combination of different experimental and biological factors, take a step toward living together. Although there are many personality attributes, one of the most important and influential models to study personality attributes has been the five-factor model in recent years [45], which is as follows:

1. Neuroticism refers to the individual's tendency toward the anxiety/stress, pity-seeking, hostility, impulsivity, depression, and low self-esteem.
2. Extraversion refers to the individual's tendency toward being positive, daring, energetic, and intimate.
3. Openness refers to the individual's desire for curiosity, love of art, artistic interests, flexibility, and wisdom.
4. Agreeableness refers to the individual's desire for generosity, kindness, empathy and sympathy, altruism, and trusting others.
5. Conscientiousness refers to the individual's desire for punctuality, efficiency, reliability and self-reliance, self-regulation, and being progress-oriented, rational, and calm. According to some researchers, neuroticism level is the most stable and strongest pre-

dictor of marital dissatisfaction, and in fact, has an inverse correlation with marital satisfaction [6, 46, 47]. About extraversion and marital satisfaction, deferent studies have not achieved the same results. Some of them have reported a positive relationship [6, 48], some negative, and some have reported a lack of association [49]. Some researchers believe openness has a direct correlation with marital satisfaction [50]. Studies of openness and its relationship with marital satisfaction conclude that paying attention to spouses' conversations and demands results in a better understanding of their point of view. Perfectionism is another attribute that has been studied. Perfectionism significantly affects human behavior; it includes both positive and negative perfectionism. Perfectionism affects all aspects of life, including romantic relationships and marital satisfaction [51]. Several studies have shown that abnormal perfectionism is less associated with marital satisfaction [52].

3. Attachment Style

Attachment styles are the patterns of expectations, needs, and emotional and social behavior that arise from the specific history of attachment experiences; these usually begin with the relationships with parents. In general, there are four attachment styles. People who have low anxiety and attachment avoidance are safe. Those with high anxiety and attachment avoidance are said to have a "preoccupied" attachment style, whereas people with high attachment avoidance and low anxiety attachment are said to have an "indifferent avoidance" attachment style. Finally, the attachment style characterized by high anxiety attachment and low avoidance attachment is known as "fearful avoidance" [53]. Naturally, many people do not fully comply with these styles [54]. People with secure attachment styles can be supportive, risk takers, may look for ways to solve their problems, be more hopeful for their action, and show devotion; these features will increase their satisfaction from relations with their spouse [42, 55]. Research has shown that when both spouses have secure attachment styles, they experience greater marital satisfaction [56], have better communication skills [57], higher cohesion

and flexibility, and show the highest level of adaptability. In contrast, people who are less secure, anxiety avoidant, or both, are less satisfied with their relationships [55]. Couples with an anxiety attachment style have poor performance and are involved in considerable emotional turmoil [58]. A lack of trust in people leads to isolation and lack of receiving support from others [44]. On the other hand, isolation and emotional reactions in extreme situations in the context of intimate relationships can cause more discontent hostility in relations between spouses and therefore increases the feeling of marital dissatisfaction [59].

4. Relationship, Communication, and Intimacy

Communication is an essential element that affects all human inclinations and is an important determining factor in the quality of relationships between spouses and marital satisfaction [60]. Communication plays a major role in marital satisfaction and intimacy between couples. Overall, relationships between spouses are formed on the basis of four basic types of relationships: emotional relationship, cognitive (intellectual) relationship, economic relationship, and sexual relationship [61]. Couples who readily communicate their thoughts and feelings with each other and can accept and understand each other's feelings experience greater marital satisfaction [62]. In fact, couples who spend more leisure time together and have common hobbies, as well as engage in verbal or emotional communication to a greater extent experience higher marital satisfaction [63].

5. Couples' Families

Families are an important role model for couples to determine the norms, beliefs, and values related to relationships and can therefore affect couples' relationship satisfaction and stability [37, 64, 65]. Positive support from family affects couples' satisfaction with their relationships and is essential for the stability of marriage. When family members are supportive, they help to resolve marital issues [66], provide financial support, or assist the couple in childcare [67]. On the other hand, negative interference of couples' family members in the couples' interpersonal relationships could

lead to decreased family commitment, marital insecurity, and conflicts and can have negative consequences on their marital satisfaction [68].

6. Forgiveness and Sacrifice

The most commonly accepted definition of forgiveness is a two-dimensional definition that includes both positive and negative aspects of forgiveness. Positive forgiveness refers to the reduction of blame, increase of understanding, reduction of anger against betrayal and behaviors associated with betrayal, and it is characterized by a sense of excitement and peace that is experienced by the forgiver. Ability to forgive is one of the essential elements in marital satisfaction [59]. This factor has a significant impact on marital satisfaction through solving conflicts [25]. McNalty has studied the connection between forgiveness, marital satisfaction, and marital outcomes [69]. If couples forgive each other for their mistakes, this treatment will have a positive impact on their relationship.

7. Religion

Relationship with God has an interactive and compensatory role in marital relationships. Dorkhim believes that religion, by creating common values and norms, adjusts behaviors, and if complied with continuously, creates the cohesion within the family [70] and reduces the possibility of divorce [71]. Several studies have reported a positive relationship between religion and marital satisfaction and have introduced religion as a predictor of marital satisfaction [72]. DerMaris *et al.* in their study stated that religious heterogeneity causes anxiety and depression in women and also showed that women are more affected by this inequality [73]. The practice of religious beliefs and emotions such as compassion and good humor instill happiness, peace, and confidence in humans, thereby leading to the strengthening of mutual trust and respect. These factors can reduce conflict and increase satisfaction, which in turn helps promote a loving relationship between the couples [25]. Paradoxically, in Danesh *et al.* study, marital adjustment regarding sexual relations in religious people is lower compared with people who have low or moderate inclination to re-

ligion. The result of their study also showed that because of lack of knowledge and education, religious people consider sexual relations negatively and consider it a sin to talk about sexual issues; thus, this view has a negative effect on their marital relationships [74].

8. Emotional Intelligence

The Bar-On concept refers to emotional intelligence as a set of cognitive capabilities, abilities, and skills that affect a person's ability to successfully cope with the demand and environmental pressures [75]. Goleman believes that emotional intelligence contributes to people's joy and happiness. Goleman defines four basic skills of emotional intelligence, which are as follows: (1) knowing one's own emotions; (2) having control of emotions; (3) being self-motivating and encouraging; and (4) recognizing the feelings of others and regulating relationships with others. In fact, a person with high emotional intelligence knows how to deal with personality types and to adjust himself/herself with others and their emotions [76]. Studies have shown that the components of emotional intelligence can be useful in marital satisfaction [25, 77]. A higher emotional intelligence level is instrumental in helping the couples to understand each other better and to control their emotions. These couples are better equipped to manage their own emotions and that of their spouses; they are therefore more satisfied with their marital relationships.

9. Personal Health

Another variable that affects marital satisfaction is the level of personal health, which includes both physical and mental health. In general, there is a meaningful relationship between mental health and marital satisfaction [47]. According to various studies on people with mood disorders, substance abuse, and certain anxiety disorders, particularly panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, depression, and obsessive compulsive disorders, marital satisfaction will be affected by these conditions [31]. Depression can lead to decreased energy level and lack of life enjoyment, which consequently result in reduced personal and social performance, and this in turn can also lead to communicational and re-

lationship problems. A study by Combs also showed that there is a correlation between marital satisfaction and physical health, which means that the good physical health of the couple leads to a more pleasurable life, prolonged life, as well as satisfaction from each other [78]. However, the relationship between marital satisfaction and personal health is a two-way relationship. The lack of marital satisfaction is correlated with weaker health status, symptoms of depression, personality problems, inappropriate behavior, and poor social status [79]. Indeed, marital satisfaction is one of the most important factors associated with mental and emotional disorders in the general population [80]. In fact, individuals who are not satisfied with their marital life are 13 times more likely than others to experience severe depressive symptoms [81].

10. Sexual Relations (Intercourse)

Several studies have pointed to the impact of sexual satisfaction on marital satisfaction. Many researchers believe that the nature of sexual relations is the most important determining factor in married life. Dissatisfactory or unconvincing intercourse will lead to the feelings of deprivation, frustration, and lack of safety and will likely endanger mental health, thereby resulting in the disintegration of the family life. Sanchez-Fuentes *et al.* showed that four factors influence sexual satisfaction, which are as follows:

1. Personal variables such as sociodemographic and psychological characteristics, mental and physical health
2. Variables related to the early relationships and sexual response
3. Factors related to social protection and family relations
4. Beliefs and cultural values such as religion [82, 83]

With increasing age, duration of marriage and number of children, the frequency of sexual activity, sexual satisfaction, and sexual desire decreases (especially in women) [19, 83], which may be due to the declining attractiveness of the person's sexual partner, increased financial activity over time, workload, childcare and so on [21]. Some researchers have concluded that education level and gender

regulate the impact of sexual satisfaction on marital satisfaction. Indeed, when other conditions are equal, any increase or decrease in sexual satisfaction leads to changes (increase or decrease) in marital satisfaction of those who are better educated. The level of increase in sexual satisfaction also leads to marital satisfaction in women faster than in men [23, 62].

Discussion

This study focuses on the factors related to marital satisfaction in couples. In our study, we identified a large number of contributing factors for marital satisfaction. Factors that were analyzed in this review included demographic specifications, attachment style, relationship, communication and intimacy, couples' families, forgiveness and sacrifice, religion, emotional intelligence, personal health, life skills, and sexual relations. Our findings indicated that the demographic specifications could be one of the important factors affecting marital satisfaction. For example, income and economic status can exert a positive effect on the couple's satisfaction. Some studies are consistent with our findings [26, 34]. Additionally, we found an important association between marital satisfaction and the relationship, communication, and intimacy between couples. Some studies are in accordance with our findings [60, 62, 63]. We also found that personality attributes depicted in the five-factor model can be one of the great factors influencing marital satisfaction. We believe that personal health and marital satisfaction can have a bilateral effect on each other. Those with higher personal health are likely to perceive greater marital satisfaction. Conversely, couples who express higher marital satisfaction indicate higher personal health. In addition, we found that sexual relations between couples are vi-

tal to marital satisfaction because if the sexual relation is not satisfactory, it will lead to endangerment of mental health [61, 62]. We also found out that factors such as the couple's family and religion have a dual effect (both positive and negative effect) on marital satisfaction. The other elements that we found in this review of studies include the importance of forgiveness and sacrifice, emotional intelligence, and security attachment style between couples. In these cases, we agree with most of the papers that were accepted.

Conclusion

The results showed that various factors are an influence in creating marital satisfaction in a couple, which is why paying attention to them can play a significant role in married life. Family counselors and therapists can benefit from these results to obtain a deeper perception of the foundations of married life and, eventually, to help decrease the high divorce rate. Thus, conducting research on marital satisfaction is crucial and indispensable with regard to providing evidence for effecting a management strategy as well as providing recommendation. Despite the issues raised in this review, other situations such as pregnancy, infertility, addiction, depression, accidents, and loss of loved ones can also directly or indirectly have a temporary or permanent impact on the level of marital satisfaction. Finally, two limitations of the review are associated with the search criteria (i.e, keyword limited to the title) and our result being obtained from only scientific papers about marital satisfaction published in English or Persian.

Conflict of Interest

We have no conflict of interest to declare.

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