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Factors of successful marriage: Accounts from self described happy couples

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the factors of successful marriage that accounts from self-described happy couples. For this purpose 300 couples were selected from among the staff of the several companies, and the parents of students. The procedure undertaken is cluster sampling. So far three couples who got a high score from ECS (1989) and described themselves as happy couples underwent an in-depth, semi-structured interview. The results show that successful couples trust and consult each other, are honest, believe in God, make decisions together, are commitment to each other, and have friendly relationship. Traditional couples and non-traditional couples differed only in the procedures of family management.

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Keyword: Successful Marriage, Happy Couples, Marital Satisfaction, Equity, Stability;

1. Introduction

It is often said that there are no individuals in this world, only fragment of families (Segrin, & Flora, 2005). Marriage is still considered as a popular institution in most countries. However, even though official statistics are not available, a considerable percentage of marriages in Iran end in divorce. Many studies have demonstrated that nowadays couples are less satisfied with their marriages compared to many years ago (Hall, 2006). A successful marriage is a marriage in which the two individuals respect their own values and principles full-heartedly; have mutual interests; feel commitment towards each other; have made a decision to be together under any circumstances; and cooperate with one another. Satisfaction of the couples requires the endeavour of the couples to gain it (Parker, Ortega, & VanLaningham, 1995). Periodically, researchers have sought to determine which factors distinguish happy, successful, and satisfying marriages from unsatisfactory ones (Kaslow, & Robison, 1996; Halford, et al 2007; Lee, & Ono, 2008). Most of the previous researches in the field of marriage and family therapy have used self-report questionnaires for the interviews. However, since 1970 systematic observation and experimental researches on the mutual relationships between couples have been undertaken (Gottman, 1994; Gottman, & Krokoff, 1989). These efforts have been made with the objective of finding out about the factors effecting happiness, and stability in

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marriage (Hall, 2006). Bereczkei & Csanaky (1996) emphasized that marriages in which the woman is younger and less educated than her spouse tend to live together for a longer time compare to other couples. Olson & Olson (2000) identified ten categories that can predict strong marriages. They are ranked in order: communication, flexibility, closeness, personality issues, conflict resolution, sexual relationship, leisure activities, family and friends, financial management and spiritual beliefs. Mckenzie (2003) using data from in-depth, semi-structured interviews states that successful marriages are self described: 1- we treat each other as equals; 2- we like each other; 3-we're grown-ups; 4- we're friends; 5- we're lucky; 6- we use humour; 7- we have strong self concepts and are committed; and 8- we communicate. Researchers commonly judge marital success with one or more of the following measures: stability, duration, satisfaction, adjustment, and commitment. Stability refers to whether a marriage remains intact or dissolves (Wright, Nelson, & Georgen, 1994). In order to better understand the working of marriage, and to identify the qualities of successful marriage in Iranian culture, we are asking happy couples scored in ECS to share their own experiences and feelings about their marriage. This multipart research focuses on the perceptions of those who have maintained marriage for many years. The research questions are as follows: 1. what themes emerge regarding the couple's marital success?

2. How and to what degree themes explained by marital satisfaction interrelate with emerging themes?

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Marital satisfaction

Marital satisfaction refers to an individual's global evaluation of the marital relationship (Hinde, 1997). Durodoye (1997) defined marital satisfaction as an individual's subjective evaluation of the specific components within her or his marital relationship. Marital satisfaction has a big role in the stability of marriage (Fatehizadeh, & Ahmadi, 2006). Garcia (1999) believes that satisfaction is considered at three levels: a) the satisfaction with one's spouse, b) satisfaction with family life, c) general satisfaction with life. Some researchers have focused on the relationship between (a) stability and marital satisfaction (Utne, et al., 1984; Givertz, Segrin, & Hanzal, 2009), and (b) equity and marital satisfaction (Saginak, & Saginak, 2005; Davis, Emerson, & Williams., 1997). Satisfactory relationship is the most important and the most complex aspect of intimate relationships. Wong and Goodwin (2009) demonstrated that in Britain, Hong Kong, and China a permanent relationship and cooperation with the spouse, support related to the wedding, and financial stability in the family are the most important factors in marital satisfaction. Cultural values and beliefs are affected by the person's ideas about himself (Markus, & Kitayama, 1991). However, very few studies have focused on investigating the details of how cultural frameworks are influenced by the perceptions and experiences of marital satisfaction. This study also attempts to explore interaction between cultural context and individual and pair's beliefs.

2.2. Equity

Equity theory focuses on the balance of benefits and contributions in relationships (Walster, & Traupmann, 1980). Equity may not be equally important to everyone (Buunk, & Van Yperen, 1991). Mckenzie (2003) shows that inequity correlates with a lower degree of satisfaction in close relationship. When relationships are inequitable, people perceive themselves to be under-benefited or over-benefited. Under-benefited inequity occurs when people receive fewer benefits relative to contributions in comparison to their partner. On the other hand, over-benefited inequity occurs when people receive greater benefits relative to contributions in comparison to their partner (Guerrero, La Valley, & Farinelli, 2008). Many studies have reported, that women feel more often deprived than men (Utne et al, 1984; Saginak, & Saginak, 2005). According to equity theory, people in equitable marriages should be more satisfied, whereas those in inequitable marriages should be distressed, with distress increasing along with the degree of inequity (Walster, Traupmann, & Walster, 1978). Pillemer et al (2008) studied the importance of fairness and equity for the marital satisfaction of older women in the USA and found that (85%) of them considered their marriages to be fair and equitable. By utilizing a combination of marital satisfaction theory, and qualitative analysis, we hope to gain a better understanding of the role of equity/inequity in happy couple's lives in Iran.

3. Method

3.1. participants

This research is based on a survey research and has a multi-method design. The sample population was selected (cluster sampling) from parents of school children, and working staff from several industrial organizations. From the ECS questionnaires distributed to 300 couples selected, only 114 pairs answered completely. This 114 couple had different educational, socio economic background, 19.3 percent of couples had no children, 27 percent of couples had one child, the rest had between 2 to 5 children. 42.8 percent of couples have been married for less than 10 years, while 57.2 percent of couples have been married for 10 years or more. The marriage ages were between 15 and 31. The couple’s ages at the time of the interview were between 22 and 56 years old.

3.2. Instrument

ENRICH Couple Scale (ECS): this questionnaire comprises of 35 items and 4 sub-scales of marital satisfaction, communication, conflict resolution, and idealistic distortion. This questionnaire was developed by Fowers and Olson in 1989. Alpha coefficient of the questionnaire for the sub-scales of marital satisfaction, communication, conflict resolution, and idealistic distortion equals to 0.86, 0.80, 0.84, 0.83 respectively and the test retest reliability was equal to 0.86, 0.81, 0.90, and 0.92 in order. The alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was measured by the researchers and it was equal to 0.74, 0.78, 0.61, and 0.80 respectively.

In-depth, semi-structured interview were organized by first preparing interview questions. Afterwards they were verified by four psychology professors. Then, the interview questions were sent to Dr. D. H. Olson based on his suggestions, the interview questions were corrected and improved and then the experimental interview were administered to two people and were corrected.

Systematic observation was arranged on the basis of the three factors including oral, non-oral, and reaction towards the interviewer.

3.3. Procedure

The questionnaire used for collecting data is ENRICH couple scales (Fower, & Olson, 1989). Our sample was drawn from among the factory staff. It was selected through random cluster sampling. Afterwards, the questionnaires were distributed randomly to 300 couples that 114 questionnaire’s pair was confirmed. From the remaining couples, 20 couples who scored high in ECS; have been married for at least 10 years; and considered themselves as happy couples were selected for the interview. From selected couples, 10 couples agreed to take part in the in-depth, semi-structured interview. So far 3 couples are interviewed, and their data is collected. Two couples considered themselves as traditional (they believe in traditional gender role). All interviews are recorded. After an interval of 2 weeks up to 1 one month, the taped interviews were transcribed and the transcriptions were given to the interviewees to confirm them. The investigators conduct follow-up sessions with the participant couples by inviting them to review conclusion in order to confirm the investigator’s interpretation and representation of expressed meaning.

4. Findings

As the first data collection on happy couples continues, the first results of the in-deep semi-structured interview have demonstrated that successful couples were introduced to each other by the relatives and all the couples had ethical, religious, cultural, social, and financial status in common. Traditional and non-traditional couples considered the items on Table 1, as the factors of successful marriage. Also, believed that the stability of their marriage is related to the items on Table 2, Further, successful couples reported that in the case of any disagreements, at first they grumbled and after a short period of time both husband and wife tried to convince each other through reasoning or one of them made concessions to end the argument between them.

Table 1, factor of successful marriage

Traditional couples		Non-traditional couples	
Being realist	Financial and social maturity	Commonalities	Consulting
Commitment	Generosity	Knowledge	Honesty in verbal and non verbal behaviour
Honesty	Mutual understanding	Patience	Mutual understanding
Sacrifice	Not humiliating and reproaching	Trust	Not behaving sentimentally
Trust	Premarital experience and education	Understanding	Valuing each other

The personal characteristics that they attributed to each other were the same for both of them. These couples had intimate relationships with each other and with other people. If their relationships with others had a negative impact on their relationship with each other, they quickly terminated those problematic relationships. Successful couples passed their leisure time with their family and parents and had a good sense of humour because they believed that life with no humour becomes boring. All of them laid much emphasis on the guidance of their children. They believed that no guidance could be superior to parents' training. The only difference between traditional and non-traditional couples was in the family management in that in the traditional marriage both husband and wife believed that the man should have the last word and in these families the financial decisions were made by the husband. In traditional families both the husband and the wife believed that the man is responsible to earn his families livelihood and the woman is responsible for doing the housework and training children.

Table 2. stability factors of happy couple

Non-Traditional couples		traditional couples	
Consult	Being respectful towards each other	Being able to make decisions	Strong belief in God
Honesty	Friendly relationship	Desires and accessible goals	Trust
Trust	Making decisions together	High self-confidence	

5. Discussion

The data of happy first 3 couples support the important of the four areas formed in the literature:

Commonalities: Happy couples personality, financial and social status in common. The previous research also emphasize that personality commonalities of couples predict a good marriage. Similar research proves that equity in marriage depends on the racial similarities (Russell, & Wells, 1991). Also other researches indicate that marital prosperities depend on the similarities between the wife and the husband (Olson, Defrain, & Olson, 1999). This means that the more husbands and wives are similar to each other; the more successful they will be in their marriage.

Equity: Mckenzie (2003) states that perceived equity in love or attachment may be an important predictor of whether the couple stays together. Steil and Turetsky (1987) suggest that equality is most conducive for building intimate relationship. The differences between the traditional and non-traditional couples were in their view about the gender role. Traditional couples consider the husband responsible for the management of family and non-traditional couples describe their relationships as a non-hierarchical and friendly. This finding confirmed the inconsistency theory that assumes couples report low marital quality and overall happiness if wives' statuses are higher than their husbands' (Gong, 2007). Also, the research undertaken by Mckenzie (2003) demonstrated that happy couples have friendly relationships.

Communication: All the couples who were interviewed emphasized that they have a healthy and harmonious relationship. Gottman (1994) suggests that the key to improving marriage is learning how to argue. The happy couples in this study indicated that after a disagreement and argument they end the argument quickly and reached to an agreement on that subject. In a longitudinal study by McNulty (2008) it was identified that the couples, who have less aggressive behaviour towards each other, would experience a longstanding marital life and a high marital satisfaction and they are more generous towards others. This research emphasized this point as well and can claim that happy couples were generous towards each other and others. This study supports the finding of Fletcher, Thomas, and Durrant (1999), who suggest that a good communication model creates high levels of accommodation and involves managing the expression of negative cognitions and emotions by not expressing them, or by responding in a positive or diplomatic fashion.

Marital satisfaction: Researchers have found that perception influences marital satisfaction (Mckenzie, 2003) Michalos (1986) created the ideal-real gap theory which proposed that discrepancies between what an individual perceives and what is ideal may affect satisfaction or happiness. The happy couples in our study did not differentiate between the realities of life and their ideals. They considered themselves as realists.

Limitations: This study's limitation is that the data collection of 10 happy couples has not been completed.

Recommendation: It is recommended that more research can be done on social, economic, SES background, and ethnic differences in Iran and then it will be compared different researches in other countries.

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