

SELF DESCRIBED HAPPY COUPLES AND FACTORS OF SUCCESSFUL MARRIAGE IN IRAN

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The purpose of this study is to identify factors of successful marriage from the viewpoint of happy couples in Iran. For this purpose, 365 couples (N = 730) were selected from staff of several industrial companies and teachers in Tehran and Birjand. Purposive sampling method was used. Eleven couples with highest scores from Four ENRICH Couple Scales (2010) was described themselves as happy couples underwent an in-depth, semi-structured interview. Happy couples formulated effective factors for their successful marriage as follows: a) we trust each other and are committed, b) we consult with each other, c) we think our relationship is intimate, d) we solve our own problems, e) we cooperate with each other in children's upbringing f) we share common beliefs, and g) we express our love to each other. Traditional patriarchal and matriarchal couples and non-traditional couples differed only in dealings with family management.

It is often said that there are no individuals in this world, only fragment of families (Segrin & Flora, 2005). Marriage was once part of the natural progression into adulthood, a means of achieving independence and an identity distinct from one's parents and kin. It is important to note that marriage is still considered a popular institution in nearly all countries and most people get married, even though they may not really know what they are getting into (Parker, 2000).

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Precise official statistics are not available, but a considerable percentage of marriages in Iran end in divorce. According to Iran National organization for civil registration (2010) about 53 percent of divorces in 2009 took place at the fifth year of couples' marriage, and about 15 percent of registered divorces occurred to couples who were married for less than a year.

Many studies have demonstrated that nowadays couples are less satisfied with their marriages compared to couples many years ago (Hall, 2006). Marriage is also frequently described as simply one of a number of lifestyle options, competing with advanced education, career achievements, and less formal relationship structures (Mackay, 1997). A successful marriage is a marriage in which 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 (Gardner, Giese & Parrott, 2004) and satisfaction of couples requires their effort to gain it (Parker, Ortega, & VanLaningham, 1995). Periodically, researchers have sought to determine which factors distinguish happy, successful, and satisfying marriages from unsatisfactory ones (Halford, Sanders & Behrence, 2007; Kaslow & Robison, 1996; 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 affecting happiness, and stability in marriage (Hall, 2006). 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 as follow: 1) we treat each other as equals; 2) we like each other; 3) we are grown-ups; 4) we are friends; 5) we are lucky; 6) we use humor; 7) we have strong self-concepts and are committed; and 8) we communicate.

Marital compatibility also impacts many aspects of the individual and family social life. Marital compatibility is the cornerstone of the optimal functioning of the family. It increases the life span of the husband and wife (Gottman & Silver, 1995), improves health, financial status of the family, and increases life satisfaction (Nock, 1995). Further, a healthy marriage will also have a positive effect on children in the family. In a study undertaken by Houseknecht and Hango (2006), it was revealed that disagreements and turmoil in a marriage have lots of negative effects on children's health conditions. Other factors, including the quality of premarital relationships, the quality of marriage, the way couples relate to one another, couples' personality types, and the way they deal with problems in their marriage influence marital happiness and lead to compatibilities or disagreements in their relationships. In order to gain a better understanding of marital success, researchers

generally measure one or more factors including: stability, duration, satisfaction, adjustment, and commitment. Stability refers to whether a marriage remains intact or is dissolved (Wright, Nelson & Georgen, 1994). Duration refers to the number of years that a marriage remains intact. Satisfaction refers to the extent that each spouse feels internal joy, contentment, and love in their relationships (Hendrick, 1988). Adjustment refers to whether spouses have mastered the tasks necessary for marriage (Wright et al., 1994), and commitment refers to a person's desire to stay in a relationship and is affected by one's attraction to the partner, the relationship, and the couple identity (Segrin & Flora, 2005). However, many marriages remain intact for very long periods. Many studies have been undertaken to identify the factors that cause, predict, or contribute to dissatisfaction and instability in marriages and relationships. Early age at marriage, violence in the family, and particular patterns of negative interaction and attribution are among the factors that are repeatedly shown to be important to marriage and relationship outcomes (Parker, 2002).

In order to have a better understanding of the marital dynamics and to identify qualities of successful marriage in Iranian culture, we asked happy couples who scored high in Four ENRICH Couple Scales (ECS) to share their experiences and feelings about their marriage. This multipart research focuses on the perceptions of those who have maintained marriage for more than 10 years. The research questions were as follows:

1. What are some of the emerging themes when we closely examine marital success?
2. How do these emerging themes relate to important theories explaining marital satisfaction?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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 and Fahizadeh and Ahmadi (2006) found that marital satisfaction has a big role in the stability of marriage in Iran. Garcia (1999) believes that satisfaction is considered at three levels: (a) the satisfaction with one's spouse, (b) satisfaction with family relationships, and (c) general satisfaction with life. Some researchers have focused on the relationship between stability and marital satisfaction (Givertz, Segrin, & Hanzal, 2009; Utne, Hatfield, Traupmann & Greenberger, 1984) and equity and marital satisfaction (Davis, Emerson, & Williams, 1997; Saginak & Saginak, 2005). A satisfactory relationship is the most important and complex aspect of intimate relationships. Wong and Goodwin (2009) demonstrated that in Britain, Hong Kong, and China, a stable relationship with the spouse, spousal

support, partnership, and stable family finances were important factors that contributed to 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 attempts to explore interaction between cultural context, individual, as well as couple's beliefs.

METHOD

Instruments

ENRICH Couple Scales (ECS). This questionnaire was developed by Olson in 1985 and updated in 2010. The ECS comprises of 35 items and 4 sub-scales of marital satisfaction, communication, conflict resolution, and idealistic distortion. Alpha coefficient for the questionnaire for the sub-scales of marital satisfaction, communication, conflict resolution, and idealistic distortion was equal 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 researchers used the Persian translation of the scales. The alpha coefficient of the questionnaire was measured 0.78, 0.78, 0.62, and 0.78 respectively.

In-depth semi-structured interview. For the in-depth, semi-structured interview, the researchers first designed the questions. These were verified by four professional marriage and family therapists. Further, the interview questions were sent to Dr. Olson for his review and approval. Based on his suggestions; the interview questions were corrected and improved and then the experimental interviews were administered to three couples and were corrected. Major questions were derived from factors of marital satisfaction. Systematic observation was arranged on the basis of the three factors including oral, non-oral, and reactions towards the interviewer.

Participants

The sample population was selected from teachers and staff from several industrial organizations in Tehran, and teachers in Birjand using snowball sampling. ECS questionnaires were distributed to 365 couples selected but only 260 returned the questionnaire with complete answers. These 260 couples had different educational and socioeconomic background. About 17.7% of couples had no children, 55.3% of couples had one or two children, and the rest had between 2 and 5 children. Forty one percent of couples had been married for less than 10 years, while 59% of couples had been married for 10 years or more. The couples' ages at the time of filling out the questionnaire were between 22 and 56 years. The demographic information is in Table 1.

In the next step, purposive sampling (Bernard, 2006) was used to select 11 couples ($N = 22$) who scored high in Four ENRICH Couple Scales, had been married for at least 10 years, and considered themselves happy couples. Couples' lengths of

TABLE 1. Demographic Information

Variables		Percent
Age	Range of 22 to 65	
Education	Diploma	34.1
	Under Graduate	55.3
	Graduate	5.9
Number of year marriage	miss	4.7
	Mean = 11.7	SD = 7.4
Number of children	No children	17.7
	One or two children	55.3
	3, 4 or 5 children	21.2
	miss	5.8

marriage were between 10 to 31 years; one couple had no children, four couples had one child, and the rest had between two and four children. Of these 9.1 % ($N = 2$) had high school diplomas; 77.27% ($N = 17$) had undergraduate degrees; and the rest 13.63 % ($N = 3$) had graduate degrees. Most couples' socioeconomic status in this sample was middleclass.

Procedure

Researchers conducted face-to-face interviews with each couple. The consent form was read and signed by each couple before the interview began. The interviews ranged in length from 50 minutes to more than three hours. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in order to categorize the themes and sub-themes of the couples' interviews. Observations were used as the basis for the qualitative research methodology, describing the non-verbal communication as it occurred while attempting to discover the essence of the experiences of these happy married couples (McKenzie, 2003). The combination of interviews and observations transcended the limitations of traditional methods of research by providing more accurate data with the possibility of reporting both quantitatively and qualitatively. After an interval of between two weeks and one month, the transcriptions were given to the interviewees for their confirmation and approval. Further, the researchers conducted follow-up sessions with the participant couples and asked them to review the research conclusions. The results and the interpretations were confirmed by all couples independently.

RESULTS

Marital Style

In this study, the couples were divided into three groups: non-traditional, traditional patriarchal and traditional matriarchal. If the relationship between the spouses was

based on sharing family and work responsibilities, their relationship was viewed as non-traditional. If the wife was staying home, housekeeping and raising children were her responsibility, and working outside the home was the husband's responsibility, their relationship was viewed as traditional patriarchal. In this group, there were several women that worked in order to take part in economic activities but still kept their traditional roles under the dominance of their husbands who were the original ruler for the family. On the other hand, if the husband stayed home and his wife held the earning power and was the original decision maker for the whole family, they were viewed as traditional matriarchal.

In this sample, all couples were introduced to each other by relatives or friends and had some religious, cultural, and socioeconomic status in common. Age differences were between 1 and 12 years with men being older than women, except for one case, where both spouses were the same age.

Prosperity

Although the couples viewed marriage as prosperity, they didn't think that getting married would surely make them prosperous and thought that prosperity was the result of their efforts. For example, a non-traditional couple explained:

"I didn't look at marriage as 100 percent guaranteed happiness; I looked at it as the result of my performance . . ."

A male patriarch participant explained:

". . . Success is not something which is ready for you in life; it is something which couples should achieve together . . ."

Another male patriarch participant mentioned:

". . . It should be taken into consideration that marriage is only one aspect of prosperity and the other aspect is your effort to achieve it . . ."

Personality Issues

After interviewing the couples, it was revealed that even though most of the couples' personality traits were complimentary, both spouses often tolerated their mate's personality traits. For example, amongst the prosperous traditional couples, one of the spouses was extrovert and the other one was introvert and a significant part of their disagreements for their first years of marriage was about daily issues and not personality traits, even though, they tried to balance these traits over time. Among traditional matriarch couples, the female spouses were more extroverted than the male spouses and among traditional patriarch couples, the male spouses were more extroverted than the female spouses. For instance, a matriarch female spouse explained:

“My spouse is patient, quiet and calm and I am the opposite . . .”

A male patriarch participant said:

“. . . I agree that my spouse is my opposite and she is more patient and calmer than I . . .”

Equality

All couples (including traditional and non-traditional) seem to have friendly relationships. They claimed that they consult with each other in making major decisions and cooperated in all family activities. Non-traditional couples negotiated with each other in order to achieve agreements over doing things and compensated each other's weak and strong points. It seemed like their agreed-upon ideas were the final decision. Usually men in patriarchal families and women in matriarchal families were those whose ideas were dominant, while decision making was a cooperative activity in non-traditional families. A non-traditional male stated:

“We always share ideas . . . our relationship is friendly . . . to achieve a conclusion both of us make the final decision . . .”

A non-traditional female stated:

“First we consider each other as friends rather than spouses. It means that we are honest . . . the results of our collaborative decision making dominate my spouse's individual decisions . . .”

One female patriarch described:

“. . . in my opinion successful life is a life in which the woman respects the man at home . . . woman is the one who should respect first, and the man should be next. A relationship cannot be equal. Building a life and making it prosperous are the woman's responsibility. The responsibility of man is to go out for work.”

One male matriarch reported:

“We share our ideas and help each other . . . it is always my spouse's ideas and opinions which have priority over mine . . .”

Communication

All spouses who took part in the study had close relationships and often talked to each other even if their conversations were repetitious. The spouses suggested that having a relationship kept their spirits fresh. They considered communication as the bloodline for their marital success. They also considered a healthy and intimate relationship connected with love necessary for a successful life. Further, all the spouses mentioned that in comparison with the beginning of their marriage, their

relationship had become more emotional and intimate, and it was still getting better day after day. For instance, a female matriarch claimed:

“ . . . We always talk to each other. If we don't talk to each other, we think that there is a problem. We even sit and chat over repetitious topics . . . ”

A male patriarch claimed:

“ . . . relationship increases the amount of love between the spouses . . . ”

A non-traditional male said:

“ . . . Those who are weak at communicating will face problems. Verbal communication is an art whereby you can express your personal needs . . . ”

A female patriarch said:

“Spouses should talk to each other one or two hours every day because it helps them get the things off their chest . . . ”

A non-traditional male participant alluded:

“Healthy relationships are the result of both spouses appreciation towards each other. When I consult my spouse, it means that I appreciate her ideas and highly regard her thought process and this makes the relationship stronger . . . ”

Conflict Resolution

All happy couples reported less impulsive and more cooperative, supportive, and flexible ways of resolving problems. They reported being less isolated from each other, yet mentioned an ability to establish appropriate space between themselves to allow time for the resolution of the problem.

All spouses claimed that at the beginning of their marriage, they had conflicts and challenges but over the years their conflicts were reduced because after a while they learned how to deal with the conflicts. They mentioned that when they faced disagreements, they did not let it last more than several hours or a day and most importantly, they solved the problem themselves and did not let others intervene. In case of the emergence of a conflict between matriarchal couples, the male remained silent. On the contrary, among the patriarchal spouses, the females remained silent and after a while they solved the problem in collaboration with each other. But among non-traditional spouses, both spouses solved the problem through negotiation. For instance, a matriarch male described:

“ . . . We turn our faces or we leave the house . . . it's better not to let the problems grow bigger. One should leave the house. In fact it's better if the man leaves the scene . . . ”

A female patriarch said:

“We remain silent and in its proper moment, we talk to each other, convince each other, and solve our problems just through talking to each other.”

A non-traditional male said:

“. . . We solve the problem together and try to solve it during the first, second or third day . . .”

A non-traditional male participant alluded:

“. . . we had lot of problems at the beginning of our marriage but now we are far better.”

Financial Problems

All couples claimed that they have agreements regarding the financial managements of their expenses. They tend to mostly consult each other and not make decisions individually. In traditional families, financial leadership of one of the spouses was more powerful than the other. For example, a matriarch male participant described:

“In my opinion, in financial management men are less competent for knowing about the household needs than women, since the house belongs to the woman and it is the woman who shops for the household items.”

A female matriarch participant described:

“We have agreement over everything we buy . . . we have saved more money in comparison to the couples at our ages and everyone confirms it.”

A non-traditional male said:

“We hide nothing . . . we are clear to the extent that my spouse can use all of my savings . . .”

A male patriarch alluded:

“. . . All the bank accounts are under my supervision”. I told my wife: “buy whatever you want. Ask me to give you the money you need.”

Leisure Activities

The couples reported that they were mostly with their families for their leisure time. Non-traditional couples were totally at the service of their families and spent their times performing mutually acceptable activities with them. Traditional spouses reported being disappointed about the difficulties with spending more time with their families, because they were busy at work. For instance, a matriarch female participant described:

“. . . When I finish my work, I try to go to visit my family as soon as possible . . . I prefer to be with my family and seldom spend time out of my family’s environment . . .”

A non-traditional male participant alluded:

“We visit our relatives every week and we go on trips with our friends . . .”

Another non-traditional male claimed:

“We try to go for a walk every afternoon . . . We try not to stay home on our leisure time.”

A non-traditional female participant alluded:

“. . . We share our joys.”

Humor and Sexual Relationship

Based on the fact that discussing sexual relationships is often taboo in Iran, and sexual affairs and sexual education are hidden, we decided to use the terms “*tender expression*” and “*humor*” in which there are sexual inclinations rather than sexual relationships. Throughout the interview process participant couples displayed their ability to laugh together as well as demonstrate their good will toward one another. Their positive energy was very apparent. Each couple had learned that there was a time to be serious and a time for playfulness. All couples reported that expression of tenderness and humor were necessary. The point which should be taken into consideration is that at the end of the interview, when the couples were asked “*is there anything else that you would like to add about what makes your marriage strong*” all non-traditional couples pointed to the importance of sexual relations in a spousal bond. For instance, a matriarch female participant described:

“. . . The man should express his love to his wife and if he doesn’t express it, the woman will search for the love outside of their spousal life . . .”

A non-traditional female participant reported:

“In my opinion, in the marital communication sections you should have asked a question about the sexual relations especially about the sexual relationship at the beginning of the marriage . . .”

A non-traditional male participant reported:

“. . . Furthermore, the sexual relationships between the couples are very important . . . I think the sexual relationship with your spouse should be correct. It shouldn’t be like the animals’ sexual relationship . . . Couples should support each other sexually . . . when facing sexual problems; both spouses should behave like friends . . .”

Family and Friends

All couples believed in sharing parental responsibilities. They also believed in having relationships with friends, spouse’s friends and relatives to the extent that

it did not damage their relationships with their spouses. For instance, a matriarch male participant described:

“We didn’t have any problems over sharing our responsibilities. In fact we are good “O-Rings¹” for each other. It means that the woman is between herself and her family and the man is the O-Ring between himself and his family”

Another male matriarch reported:

“Sharing the responsibilities should be based on Islamic instructions. Difficult and masculine duties are mine and some of the simple and feminine duties are my wife’s and some of the unimportant ones are my children’s under the supervision of parents, because children should be responsible and disciplined . . .”

Another non-traditional male said:

“Those who want to become parents should be responsible; a good woman is the one who is a good mother; and a good man is the one who is a good father . . .”

Another non-traditional male claimed:

“. . . Parents should be cooperative in educating their children and they should take care of family affairs in a cooperative manner.”

Religious Orientation

All couples seemed to respect religious values and regarded religion as one of the important factors affecting their happiness, but all couples considered religion as a personal choice, believed that everyone is responsible for what they do, and following religious traditions should not be done under pressure. All couples assumed that their values and beliefs were all rooted in honesty and proper behavior and reported that prayers and fasting and wearing a head cover should be based on personal choice. They claimed that heartfelt faith should be the core of their religion. For instance, a matriarch male described:

“Pressure and force act vice versa. For instance, the “Pahlavi²” regime would like to unveil all women, but all women kept their veils . . . pressure results in the opposite and makes people resist more . . .”

¹A flat ring made of rubber or plastic, used as a gasket. A gasket consisting of a flat ring of rubber or plastic; used to seal a joint against high pressure

²Along with the modernization of the Iranian nation, Reza Shah was the ruler during the time of the Women’s Awakening (1936–1941). This movement sought the elimination of the Islamic veil from Iranian society. Supporters held that the veil impeded physical exercise and the ability of women to enter society and contribute to the progress of the nation. This move met opposition from the religious establishment. The unveiling issue and the Women’s Awakening are linked to the Marriage Law of 1931 and the Second Congress of Eastern Women in Tehran in 1932.

Another male matriarch said:

“In the case of ideological problems, people should be balanced. This means that they shouldn’t spend a lot of time over religious issues to the extent that they don’t have enough time for their family . . .”

A non-traditional female reported:

“. . . Peace can be reached better by closeness to God. We don’t have religious prejudice . . .”

A non-traditional male said:

“My spouse and I have common viewpoints over religious problems; because religion has not had a role in our life . . . It’s ridiculous that this issue is very important for some families . . .”

A female patriarch alluded:

“. . . Religious values are personal and there is no need to force others to be religious . . .”

Another male patriarch said:

“. . . Faith is in serene, intimacy, friendship, loyalty and hearty faith in God. It is not in attending group prayer and hypocrisy . . .”

Children’s Education

All spouses dealt with the responsibility of educating their children. They claimed to have given their children supervised freedom, while setting some limits and having some reasonable expectations. The relations between parents and children were close with parents respecting their children while keeping their authority as parents. For instance, a matriarch female described:

“. . . I put my job aside for 8 years and I raised my children, because babysitters raise children the way they like. And now I am glad that I have raised my children . . . we let them express their ideas about everything . . .”

A non-traditional male said:

“. . . Since we had a role in their existence, we should be responsible to educate them with our collaboration.”

A male patriarch reported:

“. . . Children should be helped to become independent but they should be supervised . . .”

DISCUSSION

After analyzing the transcribed interviews of the couples, some themes and sub-themes were categorized. Major findings of this study revealed that the happy couples in this sample considered the following factors as the core and/or guarantee of the stability of their marriage: commitment, effort and perseverance, honesty, patience, self-sacrifice, problem-solving ability, mutual understanding, friendship, independence, faith in God, cooperation, trust, the presence of children, and staying away from compassionate and non-compassionate sympathy or interference/intrusion of others in their life.

From the viewpoint of the strategic therapists, men's and women's relationships are observed as symmetrical and complementary (Nichols & Schwartz, 2009). In this sample, the traditional couples showed a complementary relationship, while the non-traditional couples claimed to have a more symmetrical relationship with equal status for both spouses. Traditional couples considered the following elements as the most necessary factors to keep their marriage stable: forbearance, patience, faith in God, dedication, love, and having children (Table 2).

These factors are representative of the complementary relationship in their families. When one of the spouses occupies the higher position, the other spouse will be posited in the lower position. This relationship will stay stable as far as both of their needs are satisfied. On the contrary, non-traditional spouses emphasized more the factors like friendly relationships, independence, cooperation, and collaborations (Table 3). These statements indicate a symmetrical relationship based on equality.

Equity

McKenzie (2003) states that perceived equity in love and attachment may be an important predictor of whether couples stay together. Within the cultural context of Iran, it was also revealed that non-traditional spouses had friendly relationships. The patriarchal couples considered the male as the one who was responsible for managing the family affairs without impacting their sense of happiness. The successful marriage

TABLE 2. Spousal Life Stability Factors According to Traditional Couples

Traditional couples			
Training housekeeping tasks before marriage	Patience	Dedication	Reducing expectations
Raising and educating children by the female	Forbear	The presence of children	Accepting the spouse
Taking the dignitaries' advice	Effort	Valuing the spouses family	Mutual understanding

TABLE 3. Spousal Life Stability Factors According to Non-Traditional Couples

Non-Traditional Couples			
Friendly relationship	Collaborative	Independence	Honesty
Decision making	Cooperation	Commitment	Consultation

of these patriarchal couples can be explained by couple's inconsistency theory. Status inconsistency theory assumes that couples report low marital quality and overall unhappiness if wives' statuses are higher than their husbands' (Gong, 2007; Hornung & McCullough, 1981). The status outcomes include wives' and husbands' income, occupation, and education. The present study reveals that in the case of matriarchal couples, the higher position of the women was either because of role modeling in childhood (one or both spouses being raised in matriarch families) or because of the higher social, and occupational status of the women but interestingly enough, even within the cultural context of Iran that is supposed to be extremely patriarchal, it did not create tension in the marriage and couples perceived their relationships as equal and reported a complementary and satisfying relationship.

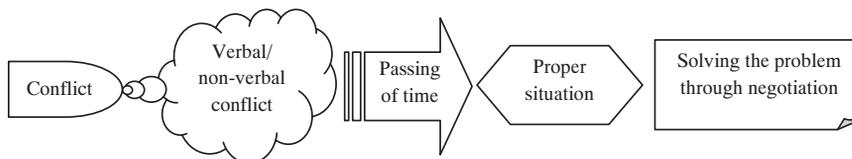
Conflict Resolution

In any marriage, it is very common to experience dissatisfactions during the very first years (Halford, Sanders & Behrence, 2001). All the couples who took part in this study reported that they had conflicts and challenges during their first years of marriage. These statements reconfirm the theory of U curve (UCT) (Black & Mendelhal, 1991) for the Iranian sample which claims that the dissatisfaction between the spouses might increase during the first and last years of marriage and the frequency of divorce in these two periods is more than other periods. During the first years and after the lessening of primary emotions, couples face the realities of life and this increases the possibility of divorce between the couples (Black & Mendelhal, 1991). Gottman (1994) believes that the secret of a marriage's success is to learn how to discuss conflicts.

One of the characteristics of the healthy and constructive relationships of the couples who took part in this study was that although they complained and criticized each other's performances, they had humanistic and logical behavior toward their spouses and the power of logic and exhibiting fair behavior did not let destructive behaviors occur between them. Thus, it appears that being extremely negative ruins the marriage but a little amount of negativity is not destructive and some negative interactions may contribute to unity and oneness (Gottman & Silver, 1995).

The couples in this study reported three different approaches/strategies to solving conflicts. The majority of couples said that when facing conflicts they usually have tried to put an end to the conflict in a very short time and arrive at an agreement (Figure 1).

FIGURE 1. First (common) strategy of the couples in conflict resolution



In another approach reported by patriarchal spouses, the female partner stayed silent and tried to solve the problem later in an appropriate situation through negotiation. Among matriarchal spouses the male partner left the house while this phase didn't even exist among non-traditional spouses (Figure 2).

The non-traditional couples reported using a third strategy while facing a conflict situation when they could not solve the problem at first trial. Both spouses have neglected or ignored the unsolved problem, and after some passage of time they forgot about the problem, and/or the problem has lost its relevance (Figure 3).

Children's Education

According to Baumrind (1967) authoritative parents have reasonable expectations about raising their children. They tend to set limits while expressing love, intimacy, and kindness to their children. They also tend to listen to their ideas and encourage them to take part in family decision-making. All the couples in this study reported consulting their children in decision-making and respected and supported them to do some tasks independently to gain experience and provided supervision. Furthermore, their children trusted and consulted them whenever they wanted to make decisions.

FIGURE 2. Second strategy of patriarch & matriarch couples in conflict resolution

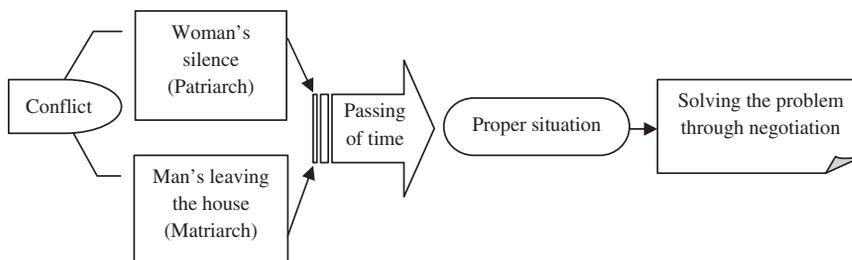


FIGURE 3. Third strategy of non-traditional couples in conflict resolution

Sexual Relationships

Western theories suggest that marriage is an institution through which sexual regulations among other things can be achieved (Popenoe, 1993). Sexuality is so intrinsically related to the satisfaction of marital partners and their subjective sense of well-being that it is included in many formal definitions of marital intimacy (Pareman, 1983; Waring et al., 1981). In this study, non-traditional couples directly pointed out to the importance of sexual relations and mentioned that spouses should support each other sexually. Traditional couples indirectly emphasized the importance of the sexual relationship in strengthening their marital relationships.

Spiritual Beliefs

All the couples considered religion and religiosity as a personal choice and commented on pressure on individuals, especially adults, to follow certain religious beliefs or behaviors. All couples considered heartfelt beliefs necessary and believed that belief in God would hold the marriage sacred and would promote the quality of marital life. The couples warned against using religiosity and maintained that everyone should be responsible and accountable for his/her own mistakes. Thus, with respect to religion, the present study suggests that belief in the sanctity of marriage and adherence to religious percepts, though perhaps once strong enough to prevent the dissolution of marriages has now been weakened (Nakonezny, Shull, & Rodgers, 1995). This is a significant finding with respect to the cultural context for Iranian couples given the existence of extreme theocracy and societal pressure to view all successful interactions from religious perspectives.

Commonalities

When couples are culturally, socially and economically more similar, they will have similar perceptions about things. As a result they will spend less time on getting to know each other and less conflict between them. Luo (2009) after studying the similarity of couples and their marital satisfaction concluded that those individuals who had more similarities like age, SES, ethnicity, personal benefits, values, and political viewpoints would be more satisfied than the couples that have less in common. Sabatelli, Bartle & Haring (2003) also confirm the claims of those couples

who reported that perceptions of the couples and their interpretations about their family life influenced their marital adjustment tremendously even though women seem to be more influenced by their family perceptions than men. In terms of similar personal characteristics, however, there was a difference between traditional and non-traditional couples. The spouses in non-traditional couples had similar personal characteristics, but in patriarchal couples men were more extroverted and among matriarchal couples, women were more extroverted.

The following Tables (4 to 6) show a short summary of the characteristics of prosperous couple in terms of family structure categorization.

CONCLUSION

As the results of the present study reveal, interestingly enough, marriage success in Iran is not significantly different from western countries. We believe that these similarities show the value all married couples put on their successful relationship regardless of their cultural background. This phenomenon might also be due to the development of a unified global society. Ultimately, there are some important points which are worth further considerations and evaluations.

The first and main factor which can affect the success of marriage is the spouses' perceptions of their marriage. There is no doubt that husbands and wives are from different families and grow with different cultural values and their thinking styles, preferences, and understandings are different. Consequently, it is quite possible that there could be disagreements between them. To deal with disagreements, each

TABLE 4. Characteristics of Non-Traditional Families

Item	Characteristics
Personality Issue	Similarity of personality
Parental role	Sharing the responsibility; equality of roles
Communication	Having intimate relationship; consultation; having close relationship with relatives, friends and the spouse's friends
Conflict Resolution	Solving the problem through negotiation; solving the problem by both couples
Financial Management	Shared account; shared financial decision-making
Leisure Activities	Many shared activities; frequent travel, and entertainment; maximum use of leisure time
Sexual Relationship	Frequently expressing love to each other; using humor; directly pointing to successful sexual relations
Religious Orientation	Religious values and beliefs are private
Educating Children	Educating children by parents; educating children in a shared manner

TABLE 5. Characteristics of Patriarchal Families

Item	Characteristics
Personality Issue	Man's extroversion; woman's introversion; personality similar in other cases
Parental role	Dissimilarity of the role; woman is responsible for indoor, and man is responsible for outdoor activities
Communication	Having intimate relationship; consultation; having close relationship with relative, friends
Conflict Resolution	Solving the problem through negotiation; solving the problem by both couples; having conflict while facing a problem
Financial Management	Man's economic management; common financial decision-making
Leisure Activities	Rare common activities; minimum use of leisure time
Sexual Relationship	Mediocre love expression by the spouses
Religious Orientation	Religious values and beliefs are private
Educating Children	Educating children by parents; close relationship between the mother and children; authoritarian relationship between the father and children

TABLE 6. Characteristics of Matriarch Families

Item	Characteristics
Personality Issue	Woman's extroversion; man's introversion; personality similar in other cases
Parental role	Inequality of the role; woman is responsible for indoor, and man is responsible for outdoor activities
Communication	Having intimate relationship; consultation; having close relationship with relative, friends
Conflict Resolution	Solving the problem through negotiation; solving the problem by both couples; having conflict while facing a problem
Financial Management	Woman's economic management; common financial decision-making
Leisure Activities	Rare common activities; minimum use of leisure time
Sexual Relationship	Moderate love expression to each other
Religious Orientation	Religious values and beliefs are private
Educating Children	Educating children by parents; close relationship between the mother and children

spouse might use different approaches and as a result of the incompatibilities of the approaches, the couples will probably encounter some problems. So it could be inferred that the more the couples' perceptions are alike, the more they would be successful in their marriage. As it was revealed in this study, all happy couples whether they were patriarchal, matriarchal, or non-traditional were satisfied with their marriages, understood each other, and enjoyed being together.

Second, it has been confirmed by several studies in the U.S. that prosperous couples are like friends (Gottman & Silver, 1995; Olson, Defrain, & Olson, 1999). The same applied to the present study within the cultural context of Iran. Traditional and non-traditional couples were friends and when couples are friends, they endure their life challenges through keeping their expectations reasonable.

The third and final point to consider is religion. All the couples commented against religiosity and considered religion a private matter. Thus, this finding is in sharp contrast with the results of similar previous studies done in western contexts. For instance, in the United States couples who agree upon spiritual beliefs report significantly higher marital satisfaction and sense of closeness than couples who have less spiritual agreement (Larson & Olson, 2004). Additionally, contrary to what has been revealed by the present study, Christiano (2000) found many studies demonstrating a positive correlation between religious homogamy and relational success. Couples who shared a spiritual orientation were more likely to pray together and attend the church together which can be regarded as two indicators for positive marital relationships. This phenomenon is important since Iranians live in a society where all public policies are highly religion based. Accordingly, it could be inferred that societies which try to control people using religious ideologies would create the opposite effects and people are more likely to desert the authorities' ideas regarding these private issues. As the results showed, couples compared the previous non-religious government (Pahlavi regime) with the current religious government and pointed out that the previous regime's force to take away religious orientations also led to reverse consequences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study can lead future researchers to examine several issues. First, a longitudinal study may yield more pertinent information since it can identify the changes which occur over time in couples' perceptions of successful marriage. Second, conducting other qualitative studies about unhappy couples and comparing the results may produce very important findings in order to help couples with their relationships. Third, future studies should explore the differences between patriarchal and matriarchal couples in personality characteristics, families of origin, and other relevant issues. Finally, there seems to be a great need for studies on different social, economic, and ethnic groups in Iran to explore their role in couple's relationships and comparing these couples to couples in other societies.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

It should be noted that the results of the present study can only be generalized to the present sample. Various factors may have affected the success or failure of the

couples in Iran with different socio-cultural backgrounds. Further, the presence of a male interviewer at the family home recording the participants' voices might have set some limitations for participants such as preventing them from expressing some relevant information. This issue might have influenced the resistance of other couples who rejected to be interviewed. In addition, a questionnaire was used to identify the successful couples and using questionnaires has its own limitations. There may have been some other successful couples that were not identified by using this questionnaire and some of the successful couples identified by the questionnaire refused to take part in this study.

The problem of inter subjectivity in qualitative studies is also a limitation of this study. Consequently, analyzing the interviews can be subject to biases or mistakes. This problem was decreased by getting feedbacks from couples after categorizing the themes as well as after the interpretations. However, in some cases some of the participants expressed various ideas which could hardly be categorized and analyzed.

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