




Analyzing Mental Constructs of Communication in Iranian Couples

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The aim of this study is to examine the sources that shape mental constructs in the minds of the participants and their strategies for bringing their own lives closer to that of a successful marriage.

Methods: This study employs a qualitative method. Research data were collected through 30 in-depth interviews with 15 Tehranian couples. The data were coded using MAXQDA software, version 2020. The number of participants was determined upon reaching saturation. In the first stage of coding, a total of 860 codes or initial concepts were extracted from the interview transcripts.

Findings: The findings of the study indicate that mental constructs of marriage are acquired, modifiable, and constructed entities that are the result of family upbringing and parental relationships, the dominant society and culture, and personal experiences after marriage. The strategies provided by participants for maintaining or achieving a successful marriage amounted to 51 suggestions and strategies, with the highest levels of agreement and recurrence around concepts such as patience, mutual respect, learning problem-solving skills, self-restraint, and communication.

Conclusion: This study highlights that mental constructs of successful marriage are shaped by family, lived experiences, and societal influences, emphasizing the importance of empathy, mutual respect, and communication for marital satisfaction and stability.

Keywords: mental construct, marriage, empathy, satisfaction

1. Introduction

Marriage is one of the fundamental pillars of human life and the primary institution for fulfilling emotional and sexual needs. However, cultural and generational changes have significantly affected spousal relationships, gradually diminishing intimacy between couples (Zandi et al., 2024). Emotional intimacy is considered a fundamental factor in the quality of marital relationships. However, marital stress often limits intimacy. Men's empathy moderated the relationship between stress and women's intimacy, but women's empathy did not moderate the relationship between stress and men's intimacy. Assessing the stress levels of both spouses is essential for understanding marital intimacy. Men's empathy can play a significant role in reducing the stress experienced in marital outcomes (Carasso & Dikla, 2024). All human beings have a fundamental need for intimacy and closeness. The concept of intimacy refers to the ability to commit to attachments and partnerships and to uphold moral strength in maintaining such commitments, even when they may require significant sacrifices and compromises (Kulik & Kitaichik, 2014).

Spousal relationships have an increasing impact on shaping individuals' mental constructs of marriage and marital relationships. The more positive an individual's mental constructs regarding marriage, the better their mental beliefs and the quality of their marital relationship (Diener et al., 2018). Dysfunctional relationship beliefs are those irrational thoughts specific to marital relationships that, when excessively used, create problems; such beliefs, besides causing emotional detachment, lead to spousal isolation and, consequently, marital burnout (Ebrahimi & Mohamadlou, 2019). Various factors contribute to the formation of individuals' mental constructs, the most important being healthy family relationships during childhood. Relationship beliefs refer to the perceptions or mentalities that couples have about their marital relationship and accept as reality (Khezri et al., 2020).

An unhealthy family environment resulting from conflict, hypocrisy, and arguments between spouses can have negative consequences for children's lives, which may manifest in the future as defiance and disobedience to social norms (Lucas-Thompson et al., 2017). Empathy is a crucial factor in fostering or preventing marital intimacy, as it can reduce emotional distance between spouses. Studies show that awareness of emotions and the impact of this awareness on interpersonal relationships is effective in marital life

(Lyusin, 2016). Expressing emotions and internal perceptions is associated with certain aspects of marital life, such as marital satisfaction. Individuals who can recognize and understand their own emotions are better able to comprehend the deeper meaning of these emotions and express their emotional states more effectively to others (Nawabi Far et al., 2019).

The literature on successful marriages highlights several key factors influencing marital satisfaction and stability. Rastgoftar and Khodadadi (2024) identified causal conditions such as family of origin and cultural-social teachings, with personality traits, intergenerational experiences, and supportive resources as key strategies contributing to marital satisfaction (Rastgoftar & Khodadadi, 2024). Sabournejad et al. (2023) emphasized the influence of Iranian cultural factors on mate selection, marital satisfaction, and strategies for maintaining marriage (Sabournejad et al., 2023). Niakani (2022) found significant differences in intimacy, desire, and empathy between traditional and modern marriages, indicating that modern marriage, when approached with awareness, enhances intimacy and desire among couples (Niakani, 2022). Akhavan (2022) demonstrated the effectiveness of Bowen family therapy in improving empathy and marital adjustment (Akhavan, 2022), while Sadeghi et al. (2022) showed that cognitive-behavioral premarital education positively affects couples' resilience and quality of life (Sadeghi Miyab et al., 2022). Safarpour (2021) highlighted the mediating role of empathy in the relationship between self-differentiation and referential thinking in marital life, suggesting that marital empathy and self-differentiation reduce referential thinking in couples (Safarpour, 2021). Ali Mohammadi and Aghajani (2021) established that marital quality is predicted by couples' commitment and empathy (Ali Mohammadi & Aghajani, 2021), while Safari et al. (2021) identified essential marital enrichment skills such as self-awareness, communication, realism, emotional management, and spiritual awareness, providing an eight-step protocol for marital enrichment (Safari et al., 2021). Shirdel et al. (2021) explored successful interfaith marriages, highlighting cultural tolerance, democratic family dynamics, and mutual respect as critical factors (Shirdel et al., 2021). Studies on successful marriages suggest that dissatisfaction extends to other aspects of life, and marital satisfaction is crucial for overall life quality (Kasapoğlu & Yabanigül, 2018). From a psychological perspective, successful marriage is characterized by happiness and fulfillment experienced by couples (McNulty, 2018; Rastgoftar & Khodadadi, 2024).

Ellis emphasized tangible satisfaction and joy as components of successful marriage (Bahari, 2015). Kazmierczak and Karasiewicz (2021) underscored the role of empathy in enhancing relationship quality, suggesting that personal characteristics predict dyadic empathy (Kázmierczak & Karasiewicz, 2021). Despite rising divorce rates, successful marriage remains a primary life goal for young adults, necessitating consideration of key factors for relationship success (Weryszko, 2020). Marital communication is pivotal for relationship quality and stability, with dysfunctional communication linked to low engagement and high exhaustion among couples (Marmola et al., 2021). Plopa et al. (2019) demonstrated that empathy and partners' evaluations of their parents' marriage predict pre- and post-wedding relationship satisfaction, with pre-marital romantic satisfaction mediating the relationship between empathy and post-marital satisfaction (Plopa et al., 2019).

This study aims to explore the mental constructs of communication in Iranian couples by addressing the following questions: What are the sources of the mental constructs of marriage in Iranian couples, and what strategies have participants employed to achieve marital success?

2. Methods and Materials

In this study, due to the lack of research based on the analysis of mental constructs of communication in Iranian couples and the need to understand how the phenomenon is explained in reality, it was essential to follow a qualitative paradigm. The researcher, considering the nature of the issue, its subjectivity, and its dependence on lived experiences, adopted the critical/interpretive paradigm as their philosophical presupposition in approaching the issue and, in line with the shared conventions among researchers in this paradigm, selected the inductive qualitative reasoning approach for the study. Additionally, by adhering to ethical principles in all methodological procedures, the selected strategy involved qualitative content analysis of data derived from semi-structured in-depth interviews, aiming to

summarize the information through the coding process. According to Creswell and Creswell (2008), qualitative research serves as a tool for exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups attribute to a social or human issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2008). The research process involves posing questions and methods, collecting data, and analyzing the data inductively, moving from specific topics to general ones, with the researcher interpreting the meaning of the data. Qualitative methods can be used to obtain subtle and ambiguous details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions, which are difficult to capture through conventional research methods (Strauss & Corbin, 2014).

The interview questions included: 1) What is your understanding of a successful marriage? 2) How have these perceptions and beliefs formed in you, and what factors (family, culture, society, etc.) have played a role in shaping these beliefs? 3) Have these perceptions changed over the years? The average duration of each interview was 40 minutes. The general condition for participants in the study was that they were couples living together without experiencing divorce or separation. The participants were selected through convenience and snowball sampling methods. Interviews were recorded using a mobile phone and subsequently transcribed. The number of participants was determined upon reaching saturation, meaning that new interviews no longer added concepts to the existing ones and merely repeated previously identified concepts. The data obtained were coded using MAXQDA software, version 2020. Saldaña (2014) argues that before coding and labeling units of meaning, each collected observation should be reviewed multiple times, separating significant sections from those with less informational importance (Saldaña, 2014).

3. Findings and Results

In the first stage of coding in this study, the researchers extracted a total of 860 codes or initial concepts from the text of 30 interviews. Table 1 illustrates the process of extracting meaningful units and initial codes.

Table 1

Sample of Meaningful Units and Extracted Initial Codes

Meaningful Units	Initial Codes
My understanding and definition of a successful marriage, in my current situation and with my current experiences, is that a husband and wife must first and foremost have shared interests and goals.	Shared interests
A successful marriage is one of the most important and beautiful experiences a person can have in life, and commitment, mutual understanding, and respect can be highly influential.	Commitment; Mutual understanding; Respect

In the second stage of coding, referred to as axial coding, an attempt was made to identify a phenomenon by considering the conditions that lead to its emergence, including the context in which the phenomenon is situated. This method of specifying the characteristics of the phenomenon adds precision and subtlety, hence the term "sub-category."

To achieve reliability (equivalent to reliability and validity in quantitative research), three conventional techniques were employed:

Member validation: In this study, a focus group method (with six participants) was used, where participants were asked to evaluate and provide feedback on the overall findings. The participants confirmed the accuracy of the findings.

Table 2

Coding Test-Retest Reliability

Interview Number	Total Codes	Agreements	Disagreements	Reliability Percentage
1	41	18	8	87%
2	23	10	3	86%
9	28	12	4	85%
7	47	21	6	89%
14	38	14	4	73%
27	30	12	5	80%
Total	207	87	30	84%

As shown in Table 2, the total number of codes over the 18-day interval was 207, with 87 agreements and 30 disagreements, resulting in a test-retest reliability of 84%. Since the reliability is above 63%, the reliability of the coding is confirmed.

Axial coding of the data revealed that mental constructs of marriage are acquired, modifiable, and constructed entities that are shaped by family upbringing and parental relationships, the dominant society and culture, and personal experiences after marriage.

Source of Mental Constructs of a Successful Marriage

1.1 Family: Family influence was one of the three main sources shaping participants' mental constructs. Being born and raised in a family and modeling its mentality and behavior led to the formation of participants' mental preconceptions about a successful marriage.

Code 1: Many factors contributed to the formation of these beliefs in my mind. One is observing the marriages and relationships of couples around me, and most importantly, the marital life of my own parents.

Code 4: Seeing our fathers selflessly working for the family taught us that we must work for our family. Seeing

Analytical comparisons: This technique involved revisiting raw data to compare and evaluate the theoretical construction with the raw data.
Audit technique: Three experts supervised various stages of coding, conceptualization, and category extraction.

To ensure scientific accuracy, the study also utilized code reviews (test-retest reliability) and peer validation. Test-retest reliability of coding is calculated by coding the same text at two different times and comparing the coded data for agreement. In this study, several interviews were randomly selected and coded again after an 18-day interval. The codes from both sessions were compared to calculate the stability index based on agreements and disagreements. Table 2 presents the results.

an older brother prioritize family despite his own illness taught me that marriage requires sacrificing personal desires for the comfort of family and spouse.

Code 8: All of these factors were influential. As I mentioned, family is the root of all our beliefs, personality, and even our physical being.

Code 16: My family greatly influenced this mindset. My mother, being proud and unreasonable, made life difficult for my father and us children. I always sought a spouse who was nothing like my mother. Being logical and a companion were my key criteria in choosing a spouse.

Code 21: Over the years of living with my spouse, I realized how significant family upbringing is. I used to believe compatibility was based solely on conversations during courtship, but living under one roof made me realize that the entire family exists in the behavior, actions, and words of one's spouse.

1.2 Lived Experiences: Experiences and beliefs gained during marital life form another basis for shaping mental constructs of a successful marriage.

Code 22: My understanding of marriage is primarily based on my own experiences and the experiences of those around me.

Code 6: In youth, people seek things like physical beauty or wealth, but living under one roof and the experiences gained during marital life reveal that appearance and wealth are minor factors compared to others that truly matter.

Code 11: My current beliefs about successful marriage are the result of my experiences, studies, and observing other marriages.

Code 23: Over time, I have come to believe that if a couple genuinely loves and understands each other, they can communicate without words, simply through a glance.

1.3 Society and Culture: Participants identified dominant culture and societal structure as another source of mental constructs of a successful marriage.

Code 4: In our society, men are expected to be breadwinners, and women are expected to manage the household, even if they work outside the home.

Code 7: Over the years, societal changes have altered the perspectives of both men and women significantly compared to thirty years ago, and these changes have influenced me as well.

Code 8: Schools, universities, friends, and acquaintances play significant roles in our social learning and understanding. Social culture, virtual spaces, and the free flow of information, especially in social sciences, civil liberties, and gender equality, have greatly influenced my views.

Code 12: This mindset is the product of my interactions with the society I live in and its dominant culture.

Code 16: Societal conditions open one's eyes, encouraging cautiousness, but all of this requires a rational mind, not an emotional one.

Figure 1: Source of Mental Constructs of a Successful Marriage (Source: Authors)

Participants' Strategies for Achieving or Maintaining a Successful Marriage

Participants provided 51 suggestions and strategies for achieving or maintaining a successful marriage, with the most agreement around concepts such as patience, mutual respect, learning problem-solving skills, self-restraint, and communication.

Code 3: We have experienced poverty in our lives. I am unemployed, and my spouse's job is unstable. We have endured years with no money, even with two young children, often borrowing to survive. What kept our family together and led our children to academic and career success was communication. My spouse and I discuss everything daily, and our children participate in these conversations, sharing their views. This communication has brought us closer and resolved many issues.

Code 23: Successful marriage varies from person to person, but I believe anyone planning to marry must have extensive conversations with their partner to ensure compatibility. They should prioritize peace, remain silent when their partner is upset to avoid conflict, and make joint decisions together as partners, not as individuals.

Code 27: To create a successful marriage, I try to be rational and patient, avoiding impulsive reactions. As a mother and wife, I prioritize my spouse, support him, manage the household efficiently, and face all life events collaboratively with my spouse.

Table 3

Axial Codes with Their Open Codes

Axial Codes	Open Codes
Family	Parents' relationships Family upbringing Observing parents' sacrifices Family priorities Role models from parents and siblings Desire to avoid negative parental traits Shared family values Family traditions and customs Parental expectations Sibling interactions Emotional support from family Family conflicts and their resolution Family communication patterns Observing extended family marriages
Lived Experiences	Personal marital experiences Learning through challenges in marriage Growth from marital conflicts

Society and Culture	Financial struggles and adjustments
	Emotional bonding over time
	Shared responsibilities and tasks
	Parenting experiences
	Career and job-related impacts on marriage
	Social interactions and friendships
	Evolving priorities after marriage
	Lessons from past relationships
	Overcoming crises together
	Social norms and expectations
	Gender roles in society
	Cultural beliefs about marriage
	Influence of media and social networks
	Educational system influences
	Legal and economic factors
	Peer influences
	Exposure to diverse marital models
	Cultural events and traditions
	Religious beliefs and practices
	Societal changes over time
	Community and neighborhood interactions

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Marriage and family formation are fundamental principles for the sustainability and survival of societies, providing the foundation for social upbringing and the development of individual personality. Marriage must have criteria for assessing its success or failure. In this study, the researchers aimed to provide a comprehensive definition of the abstract phenomenon of successful marriage through in-depth interviews. Mental constructs of a successful marriage encompassed numerous concepts. In other words, these concepts emerged from individuals' lives within society and were influenced by family, society, and dominant culture. Understanding and mutual comprehension, empathy, intimacy, support, growth and development, mutual satisfaction, understanding the essence of marriage, and a sense of peace were the most frequent concepts forming participants' mental constructs of a successful marriage.

The findings of Rastgoftar and Khodadadi on couples' strategies, including compensatory behavior, use of supportive resources, relationship adaptability, logical support, and rational conduct (Rastgoftar & Khodadadi, 2024), align with the strategies of the participants in this study. The results of Sabournejad et al. (2023), which highlighted the influence of Iranian culture on marital satisfaction (Sabournejad et al., 2023), are consistent with the identified source of mental constructs of a successful marriage in this study. In comparison, the findings of Niakani (2022), which demonstrated the significance of intimacy, desire, marital stability, fear of intimacy, and empathy in both traditional and modern marriages (Niakani, 2022), cannot be confirmed or refuted by this study due to differences in methodology and types of analyses. Similarly,

the results of Sadeghi et al. (2022), which indicated the impact of pre-marital education using a cognitive-behavioral approach on resilience and quality of life among engaged couples (Sadeghi Miyab et al., 2022), cannot be confirmed or refuted by the findings of this study. Additionally, the results of Safarpour (2021), which showed that empathy mediates the relationship between self-differentiation and referential thinking in marital life (Safarpour, 2021), cannot be confirmed or refuted by this study. However, the findings of Ali Mohammadi and Aghajani (2021), which demonstrated that marital quality is predictable based on couples' commitment and empathy (Ali Mohammadi & Aghajani, 2021), are consistent with this study. The findings of Safari et al. (2021), which identified essential skills for enriching marital life, including self-awareness and awareness of personality differences, communication skills, realism, religious and spiritual skills, emotional management, and awareness of the family life cycle (Safari et al., 2021), can be considered supportive of the results of this study.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

One limitation of this study was participants' reluctance to participate in interviews. Many interviews were excluded due to the non-cooperation of one spouse.

It is suggested that further research be conducted on the subject of mental perception and understanding of successful marriage as an influential factor in marriage formation, sustainability, and stability.

It is also recommended that the results of this study be examined by family and family therapy specialists to utilize their expertise in improving marital conditions and transforming marriages into successful ones.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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