A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF FACTORS INFLUENCING MARITAL SATISFACTION AMONG INDIVIDUALS IN ADDIS ABABA

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the factors that influence marital satisfaction among individuals in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The research utilized focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews with a sample size of 21 participants. The data revealed a range of important positive factors that are perceived to contribute to marital satisfaction. These include beliefs in the sacredness of marriage and family, the power of virtues in marital relationships, the neighborhood as a safe haven and source of strength, and self-disclosure. Practitioners are recommended to emphasize the positive aspects of marital relationships in order to maintain or enhance marital satisfaction. The interventions intended to enhance marital satisfaction should include both individual and external factors that aim to improve marital satisfaction.

KEYWORDS: marital satisfaction, qualitative study, Virtues, neighbors

INTRODUCTION

Marital satisfaction is a crucial aspect of marital relationship that influences people's well-being. It contributes to the overall health of individuals and families as a whole (Chapman & Guven, 2016; Javanmard & Garegozlo, 2013). Marital satisfaction refers to the evaluation of the quality of one's marital relationship (Li & Fung, 2011). A growing body of research on marriage has identified various health and psychosocial benefits of a strong marital relationship (Baneian et al., 2006; Robles, 2014). A satisfying marriage, as an institution, serves as the foundation for family stability and unity.

It also contributes to marital quality (Li & Fung, 2011) and adaptation (Kluwer, 2010). However, marital dissatisfaction and divorce are the common problems of modern marriage (Tegegne et al., 2015). Understanding the factors that positively influence marital satisfaction will be crucial to enhance marital satisfaction among couples. Scholars linked positive behaviors such as forgiveness and sacrifice (Fincham et al., 2007; Timothy-springer & Johnson, 2018), generosity (Dew & Bradford Wilcox, 2013) and holding positive beliefs about marriage (Willoughby, 2014) with high marital satisfaction. However, studies that emphasize on factors that enhance marital satisfaction are still in their

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infancy stage, particularly in non-western cultures. Specifically, despite the increasing number of studies on marriage in Ethiopia (Mekonnen et al., 2019; Tegegne et al., 2015; Yizengaw et al., 2014), none of them have examined the factors that positively contributes to marital satisfaction.

Moreover, in addition to the individual factors that influence marital satisfaction, external factors such as neighbourhood solidarity has been also linked to marital satisfaction (Minnotte et al., 2008) However, little is known about the impact of neighborhood factors on marital satisfaction. In particular, none of the studies conducted so far in Ethiopia have attempted to examine marital satisfaction in relation to neighborhood factors (Mekonnen et al., 2019; Tegegne et al., 2015; Yizengaw et al., 2014). Therefore, the objective of this study was to investigate the factors that influence marital satisfaction among individuals in Addis Ababa. The following research questions were developed to guide this study: (1) How would participants conceptualize and value marriage? (2) What factors do participants perceive as important for satisfying marital relationships?

This paper has both theoretical and practical significance. Understanding the factors that contribute to satisfying marital relationships is crucial for the development of successful family and marriage intervention programs. It benefits marriage and family counsellors to gain better insight into the factors that strengthen marital relationships and to focus on their client's strengths rather than their deficits. In addition to its contribution to the existing literature, the findings of the present study may also benefit policymakers. This study will also serve as a baseline for future investigations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies conducted so far identified various factors that are related to marital satisfaction. For a better understanding of the factors that influence stable and healthy marital relationships, scholars suggest the need to emphasize interpersonal, intrapersonal, and social factors (Lewis & Spanier, 1979). From a positive psychology perspective, individual factors such as desires, significance, and motivation are crucial for the establishment of a high-quality marriage (Fincham et al., 2007). Interpersonal factors, such as a positive attitude and behaviour (Dew & Bradford Wilcox, 2013; Fincham &

Beach, 2010), forgiveness (Timothy-springer & Johnson, 2018), and conflict management (Hunler & Gencoz, 2005), as well as social factors like neighbourhood support (Minnotte et al., 2008), play a vital role in enhancing marital well-being and satisfaction. Individuals in healthy marital relationships are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors rather than risky behaviors (Fleming et al., 2010; Whisman et al., 2006). In recent times, the prevalence of negative characteristics such as selfishness, negative attitudes, and behavior have become a common phenomenon among couples (Cherlin, 2010; Fincham & Beach, 2010). Thus, understanding the positive factors that contribute to marital satisfaction is timely, considering the challenges that the institution of marriage has faced.

A family strength-based approach encourages scholars to emphasize culturally sensitive positive marital qualities that contribute to strengthening marital relationships (Defrain & Asay, 2007). As a result of the efforts made by the family strengths perspective and the positive psychology movement, scholars have shifted their focus toward studying factors that strengthen marital relationships (Braithwaite et al., 2011; Brandau-Brown & Ragsdale, 2008). The study of positive psychology emphasizes identifying strengths that contribute to marital success (Snyder & Lopez, 2001). From this positive perspective, scholars have identified several relationship behaviors that contribute to a happy and stable marital relationship. These behaviors include conflict resolution skills (Hunler & Gencoz, 2005), forgiveness and sacrifice (Fincham et al., 2007; Timothy-springer & Johnson, 2018), generosity (Dew & Bradford Wilcox, 2013), sharing household responsibilities and child care (Timothy-springer & Johnson, 2018) and holding positive beliefs about marriage (Willoughby, 2014). However, most previous research on marriage has primarily focused on deficit factors of marital relationships such as divorce and marital dissatisfaction (Abdol Rahimi et al., 2012; Lavner & Bradbury, 2010; Tegegne et al., 2015). Moreover, although some progress have been made, there is still a scarcity of studies that emphasize on strengthening factors in marital relationships (Fincham et al., 2007; Marks et al., 2008)

Moreover, the marital environment, as an external factor, also has an impact on marital relationships (Karney & Bradbury, 2005). For instance, studies have indicated that external

factors, such as positive neighborhood solidarity, also play a vital role in enhancing marital well-being (Hostetler et al., 2012; Minnotte et al., 2008). Neighbors, as an important social capital, provide nearby individuals with mutual support and a sense of connectedness, which may alleviate the stress experienced in marital relationships (Madigan et al., 2016). A couple's social network, such as a supportive neighborhood, has been identified as a crucial resource that facilitates a fertile condition for a healthy marital relationship. For instance, perceiving one's neighbor as a better place to live and raise children has been linked to satisfying marital relationships (Mannon & Brooks, 2006). Scholars have also revealed a positive relationship between a strong sense of community in the neighborhood and high levels of marital satisfaction (Hostetler et al., 2012; Minnotte et al., 2008). Despite the growing effort to identify external factors that positively contribute to marital satisfaction, little is known about the impact of external factors on marital satisfaction.

Theoretical Framework

According to the vulnerability-stress adaptation theory individual characteristics, the nature of the stressor, and the availability of social support influence their capability of dealing with stressors (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). In the context of marital relationships, how individuals deal with challenges in marital relationships is influenced by their individual qualities and the surrounding environment. For example, factors such as holding positive beliefs about marriage (Amato & Booth, 1997), virtuous behavior (Dew & Bradford Wilcox, 2013), and neighborhood solidarity (Minnotte et al., 2008) contribute to marital satisfaction. Thus, VSA was used as a theoretical framework to understand the factors influencing marital satisfaction.

METHODS

Data used in this study were collected from married individuals in Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. We chose this area because it has the highest prevalence of marital problems. Given that the main focus of this study is to examine the factors influencing marital satisfaction, it would be valuable to access individuals from diverse backgrounds in one area. We used a purposeful sampling technique to select participants for the study. Hence, the sample consisted of 21 individuals (i.e., ten

males and 11 females). Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. A semi-structured interview guide was prepared in advance and utilized during the interview. The interview guide has two parts. Part one consists of questions that help to build rapport with the participants, such as "How do you explain marriage?" Part two requests participants to reflect on their beliefs and experiences regarding the positive qualities and social capital that contribute to marital satisfaction. For example, what do you believe makes a marriage happy? Before the interview, we establish rapport with the participants and assure them that their responses will be kept confidential. After obtaining their consent, we conducted the interviews at a location convenient for the participants. Potential participants were identified by the village committee leader. We conducted interviews with individuals who were available during the data collection period. The interviews were conducted in the Amharic language and lasted approximately 35 to 45 minutes. A reflexive thematic analysis approach was used to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The data was translated from Amharic to English before being subjected to analysis. To generate themes, we systematically coded the data and continuously refined them. Then, we integrate them with theoretical and empirical evidence to generate a comprehensive thematic description of the data. Finally, we formulated assertions regarding the positive techniques that participants perceived to be used to enhance marital satisfaction. To address ethical issues, we adhered to the following ethical protocols. First, we obtained ethical clearance from the committee for ethical approval to conduct the study. Second, we obtained the participants' consent after informing them about the study. If an individual did not consent to participate, we selected another eligible person from the same area. In spite of their willingness to participate in the study, some of the participants showed signs of hesitation when asked to sign the consent form. As suggested by Morrow (2013), we obtained their consent by recording their voice at the initial stage of data collection. Finally, in presenting the findings of this study, we maintained the anonymity of participants' identities by assigning pseudonyms to all of them.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Demographic Characteristics of Participants
Background characteristics such as age, sex, educational status, duration of marriage, and number of children are presented in Table 1. A total of twenty-one individuals from different areas in Addis Ababa participated in the study.

They were aged between 23 and 56 years (Mean 36.80, SD = 10.33). The duration of their marriage ranged from 3 to 27 years (Mean 8.47, SD = 6.37). In addition, the participants had an average of 2.23 children (SD=1. 33). Sex-wise, the majority (N =11; 52.38%) of the participants were female. Concerning participants' formal educational level, the majority (N=11; 52.38%) of them were degree graduates.

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants (N=21)

Variables	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Age	23	56	36.80	10.33
Duration of marriage	1	27	8.47	6.37
Number of children	0	5	2.23	1.33
	Frequency		**%**	
Sex Female	11		52.38	
Male	10		47.61	
Educational status				
Secondary	2		9.52	
Diploma	5		23.80	
Degree	11		52.38	
MA/MSc	3		14.28	

Participants shared their beliefs and experiences they perceived as important to satisfying marital relationships. To generate themes from the analysis, we systematically coded the data and continually refined them. The responses of the participants were categorized under the following themes; the sacredness of marriage and family, the power of virtues in marital relationships, the neighborhood as a safe haven, and the source of strength and self-disclosure. This section presents and discusses each theme including verbatim quotes.

The Sacredness of Marriage and Family
Marriage as one important life event is the most persistent theme asserted by the participants. Participants frequently associated sacred union, love, family, and support with their conception of marriage. A strong belief in the holiness of marriage facilitates couples' commitment and contributes to marital satisfaction. Participants frequently described marriage in terms of its holiness and highly valuable institution which is linked to marital satisfaction. In addition to enhancing couples' responsibility, beliefs in marriage holiness also inhibit their intention to have an extra-marital affair and divorce, because they believe marriage is given by God. In most of their description, participants mentioned having

marriage as an honor and children as a symbol that maintains marriage. Such strong positive belief in marriage and family gives them enough reason to be happy in their marriage. **An illustrative quote is:**
I believe that marriage is honorable and something respected very much. Marriage is the most sacred relationship (Tidar kidus na yetakabara new, literally translated as 'holiness and honorableness of marriage). Marriage is from God and… It is a life-long commitment among couples… Any romantic relationship committed outside of marriage is against God's will. (Participant, 17)

In his description, another participant perceived marriage **as it is from God and the meaning of life…** Marriage gives you a reason to leave because it fills you with a sense of accomplishment... No matter how you are not happy, divorce is not an option. (Participant, 12)
Indeed, high values placed on marriage were not unique beliefs held by the participants of this study. Other studies also showed strong positive beliefs about marriage among couples in different parts of the world with high marital satisfaction and well-being (Willoughby, 2014; Willoughby & Belt, 2016). Beliefs about

marriage influence one's commitment and effort to invest in their relationship (Willoughby, 2014). Previous studies have also shown that belief in the permanence of marriage encourages couples to repair their relationship instead of considering divorce (Amato & Booth, 1997).

In other cases, participants claim marriage is a means to be blessed with family. Particularly, being blessed with children was a compelling factor that participants perceived as crucial for maintaining satisfying marital relationships. They believed that having children is one goal of marriage and that marriage is most fulfilling when it is accompanied by children. Ultimately, this in turn creates a situation that further enhances the emotional ties between couples and increases satisfaction with their marriage. In addition to encouraging cooperation between couples, children also play a stabilizing role when couples dispute on some issues. For example, during our interview, participant, 21 remarked:

As a building stands due to its pillars, marriage also remains intact due to children (lij yetidar makomia musoso new, literally translated as 'child make marriage to remain intact')...Your marriage satisfaction depends on the presence of children… They [meaning children] make marriage sweet and strengthen the bond between couples.

From another participant account, 25:

Children are a common symbol of the couple...They help the couple to develop the possessive pronoun 'our' and it's a powerful instrument to connect couples…Children inhibit you from engaging in aggressive behavior with your partner.

Consistent with the present data, Onyishi et al. (2012) found that children contribute to a high level of marital satisfaction. A study by Fatima & Ajmal. (2012) has discussed children as a strengthening factor in couples' relationships. However, other studies have linked having children with negative marital outcomes (Adigeb & Mbua, 2015; Kowal et al., 2021).This inconsistency may be attributed to cultural differences in the study context. As opposed to individualistic cultures, people from collectivist cultures place a high value on and desire to have children. For instance, similar to what participants stated in the present study, having children has been identified as a significant factor in getting married and marital satisfaction among Nigerians (Onyishi et al., 2012).

Participants commented that, like oil in a machine, love keeps the relationship between a couple smooth and healthy. They also portrayed love as something that gives life into marriage. It creates a conducive situation for couples to communicate and work together to solve their problems. A study also linked love as an important component of marital relationships (Hoesni et al., 2016). Participant, 2 stated:

As oil in a machine, love smoothness marital relationship...love is something that gives life to marriage…love helps the couple to maintain their marriage regardless of economic problems (kaleh asfteh kalelah aslteh tinoraleh, literally translated as 'love is the key to life, not wealth).

Another participant's perception of marriage is the significance of emotional and material support between couples. The participants in the present study also linked support and cooperation between couples with marital roles, such as child care and household tasks with marital satisfaction. For the majority of participants, the specific types of marital roles they should share were not the main issue. Instead, they believed that the person who had the most time and availability should take on the responsibility of household chores, including childcare. Consistent with this findings, Amato et al. (2003) found that a positive association between gender role sharing and marital happiness. Similarly, scholars have linked the perceived fairness of housework division (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2020) and gender role-sharing with high-quality marriages (Masarik et al., 2012).

The Power of Virtues in Marital Relationships

This theme demonstrates what qualities participants perceive are crucial for satisfying marital relationships, which is tied to one's ability to be able to self-control, forgive, and scarification. Participants repeatedly discussed how being equipped with such qualities contributes to the experience of a satisfying marriage. Particularly, they highlighted how these factors fostered consciousness, calmness, and kindness and ultimately led to better marital satisfaction. These factors are perceived to give couples the strength and resilience to overcome most of their marital problems. The majority of the participants discussed the need for couples to be equipped with these virtues regardless of their backgrounds. The value of these virtues is more evident given the high

prevalence of marital problems and their undeniable role in culminating those problems. For most, having self-control has immutable marriage benefits.

Self-control is crucial because disagreement is inevitable, particularly in marital relationships**...** But how it [meaning disagreement] managed is what matters **(**Ke ayayaz yikadadal; ke anagager yiferadal**,** literally translated as '**it torn from how it handled; it judged from how it said')…When you came across something upsetting, it is good to behave calmly otherwise things may get worse…Sometimes my wife gets easily angry and loses her control, but I try to be quiet and calm down to control the situation. (Participant, 18)

The majority of the participants asserted that it would be helpful if at least one person in the couple could play a cooling role. Many of them acknowledged that a self-control failure can fuels disagreements between couples and may even make it difficult to repair the relationship. As quoted from participant, 15:

I believe that if my husband loses his temper, it is best not to confront him directly... Instead, I should try to behave in ways that help him to calm down and regain his consciousness... you should not let things that fuel disagreement further (be tseb wust tsehay megbat yelebatm, literally translated as 'do not let the sun enter in a disagreement').

As for me, it is not surprising to see disagreements between couples… As long as you are in a marriage you may hear and see something bad and irritating, but you should behave calmly for the sake of your marriage. (Participant, 6)

Consistent with the present findings, Vohs et al. (2011) has linked self-control to high marital satisfaction. They discussed various benefits of self-control, such as smooth interaction, accommodation, absence of conflict, and forgiveness. Similar to previous findings, participants frequently expressed that self-control helps to maintain a smooth relationship with their partner (Vohs et al., 2011).

Other participants associated the experience of satisfying marital relationships with the virtue of forgiveness. They claim that it is possible to heal the relationship that they are frustrated with due to the misbehavior of their partner using forgiveness. Participants also discussed that

forgiveness led to feelings of being loved and valued among couples. Following is a quote from Participant, 8:

Conflicts are the roads that lead to divorce, whereas forgiveness is the road that leads to a happy relationship …Both couples should ask and forgive each other from the bottom of their heart to save their marriage.

Participants also indicated satisfying marital relationships with couples' readiness to sacrifice for the sake of their marriage. They believe as a husband or a wife one should be ready to do or devote anything for their beloved one and family. This encouraged couples to fulfill the obligations the family expects from them. This in turn greatly enhanced their marital satisfaction. These findings are consistent with previous study (Fincham et al., 2007). They discussed how practicing forgiveness in marital relationships can fill couples with feelings of faithfulness, love, and self-worth. Previous studies have also associated virtues such as forgiveness and acts of sacrifice with accommodation and remaining faithful (Fincham et al., 2004, 2007).

The Neighborhood as a Safe Haven and Source of Strength

This theme discusses how the neighborhood provides a sense of safety and strength for individuals in marital relationships. The majority of participants in the present study associated marital satisfaction with improved neighborhood interaction. They overwhelmingly reported that their neighbors made them feel safe and secure. Many of the participants linked their marital success with the emotional and social support of their neighbors, with only a few exceptions. Solidarity with people in their neighborhood provided participants in this study with opportunities to share important life skills experiences, which enabled them to incorporate them into their marital relationship. In addition to declaring it as an important aspect of human life, neighborhood solidarity is also associated with cooperation in child care, material exchange, and informational exchange. The tendency to equate neighborhood solidarity with important social capital was reflected in participants' accounts. In our conversation with one of the participants, 4:

Having good relationships with neighbors can provide you a sense of security and peace of mind (ke ruk zemed yekirb gorobet yishalal, literally translated as 'it is good to have neighbor than a distant family')…Your neighbors are often

the first people to reach out to you, whether you are experiencing joy or difficulty.

In line with this finding, previous studies have established a connection between neighborhood interaction and access to crucial social support, which in turn contributes to marital satisfaction (Mannon & Brooks, 2006; Minnotte et al., 2008). Participants also described neighborhoods as a source of support and strength for married individuals. Neighbors cooperate in a variety of ways, including taking care of each other's children, exchanging material goods, and sharing information. The benefits of having good neighbors became especially apparent when they had children. Participant, 10 stated:

As neighbors, we cooperate by offering a listening ear to children and checking on them when their family is not available... It can be a huge relief because relying solely on a maid to care for a child can be worrisome... Cooperating with your neighbors will provide you with peace of mind.

Another participant (16, 18) also added that:

When I plan to go somewhere, I drop my children at my neighbor's house entrusting that they would take care of them (Adera, literally translated as 'entrusting on you').

Consistent with this finding, Madigan et al. (2016) found that neighbors play a role in enhancing the sense of connectedness and mutual support among neighbors, which contributes to positive marital outcomes. Due to neighbors' engagement in taking care of one another's children, couples are less likely to experience marital stress (Völker & Flap, 2007).

Self-disclosure

The participants reported the positive role of self-disclosure between couples in enhancing marital satisfaction. Most participants expected their partners to be honest and open with them. They stated that there should be no secrets between themselves and their partners. The participants believed that honesty increases couples' confidence in their marriage. Participants also discussed that self-disclosure strengthens their sense of unity and belonging. Participant, 7 said:

As his wife, I want my husband to be honest with me… There should be no secrets between us. I believe secrets will lead to suspicion and mistrust in the relationship... Even opening bank accounts without informing your partner is not advisable for couples.

In their discussion, participants linked their experience of a satisfying marriage with the practice of honesty and open communication between partners, which helps them to build trust and confidence in each other. Similarly, Quek and Fitzpatrick. (2013) found that couples' self-disclosure plays a positive role in enhancing marital satisfaction. Furthermore, a study conducted by (Kito, 2010) involving 145 participants also revealed a positive association between self-disclosure and marital satisfaction. This positive association between self-disclosure and marital satisfaction appears to be consistent across different cultures (Kito, 2010; Quek & Fitzpatrick, 2013).

CONCLUSION

The study was aimed to identify factors influencing marital satisfaction. From the interviews and FGDs conducted it is shown that there are important factors that influence marital satisfaction, e.g., the sacredness of marriage and family, the power of virtues in marital relationships, the neighbourhood as a safe haven, and the source of strength and self-disclosure. Individuals' beliefs in the holiness of marriage and honoring it have impact in enhancing marital satisfaction. The presence of children, cooperation in marital roles, and love were also discussed as important factor for satisfying marital relationships. Virtues in marital relationship such as self-control, forgiveness, and sacrifice were also identified as crucial factors in enhancing their satisfaction with their marriage. Neighborhood solidarity contributes to marital satisfaction by enhancing mutual support and a sense of connectedness among neighborhoods. Finally, the role of self-disclosure was linked to fostering confidence and unity, ultimately enhancing marital satisfaction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

• Due to the positive impact that valuing marriage has on marital satisfaction, marriage and family counselors should encourage their clients to respect marriage as an institution and develop positive beliefs about it. Counselors should develop programs that educate couples about the benefits of marriage and starting a family.

• Practitioners should also emphasize equipping their clients with the virtues of self-control and forgiveness. Due to the positive impact of self-control and forgiveness on marital satisfaction, practitioners should develop a program to help their clients cultivate these

qualities. This can be achieved by creating opportunities for couples to share success stories of self-control and forgiveness, discuss the benefits of these qualities, and learn how to incorporate them into their daily lives.

• Solidarity with neighbors was found to be crucial for satisfying marital relationships. Therefore, community and social workers should facilitate awareness creation programs that promote solidarity and foster a cohesive environment among individuals within a neighborhood. At church and other community events, couples can be educated and informed about the benefits of cooperating with neighbors on various issues, especially in terms of supporting each other with childcare and exchanging information.

• Self-disclosure was found to contribute to a high level of marital satisfaction. Accordingly, psycho-social practitioners should develop a program that enhances self-disclosure between couples. Couples should be provided with opportunities to share their experiences about the benefits of being honest and open with their partner, and to practice it.

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