

## Happy Marriage: A Qualitative study

Maria Fatima and M. Asir Ajmal  
Government College University, Lahore

The present study is focused on the factors leading to a happily married life. The sample included a married woman drawn from convenient sampling. Semi-structured interview was conducted to investigate her experience of being happily married and what factors she thinks are important to be happily married. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was applied as a research method. Sixteen categories emerged after coding the data were Similarities of Religious Sects, Satisfaction, Compromise, Love, Care, Trust and Understanding, Communication, Age Differences, Sincerity and Respect, Sharing, Forgiveness, Spouse Temperament, Strength through Children, Family Structure, Education and Status, and Positive In-Laws Relations. This study has important implications for married couples and counselors.

*Keywords:* happiness, marriage, interpretative phenomenological analysis, categories

It is said that marriages are made in heaven and celebrated on the earth. This popular belief is true to great extent because it is a special bond shared between two souls, who are tied in the wedding knot for the rest of their lives (Dev, 2010).

Marriage is defined as the civil status of one man and one woman united in law for life, for the discharge to each other, and the community of the duties legally incumbent on those whose association is founded on the distinction of sex (Black's Law Dictionary, 1891). It is also defined as a social agreement between two individuals that unites their lives legally, economically, and emotionally (Sheri & Stritof, n. d).

Marriage is the social institution under which a man and a woman establish their decision to live as husband and wife by legal commitments and religious ceremonies. It is a legal contract between two people that enables them to reproduce. It is an institution in which interpersonal relationships, usually intimate and sexual are acknowledged by a variety of ways depending on the culture or demographics. People marry for a variety of reasons, for example legal, social, emotional, economic, spiritual, religious or simply to extend their family and to have children. Marriage may be arranged to fulfill family obligations for legal establishment of a nuclear family unit, for legal protection of children or to be with one's loved one (Marriage, n. d). Marriage has many important functions in a society; it prevents people from going towards adultery, to have children, and to have an intimate partner for sharing and comfort.

The ceremony that marks the beginning of marriage is called wedding. Wedding is celebrated differently in different cultures depending upon their customs and traditions. There are many factors that contribute to successful marriage. Some of these are love, understanding, respect, commitment, sharing, care, education, economic status, temperament, family structure, trust, communication, age difference, sectarian difference, forgiveness and satisfaction. Good and co-operative in-laws and a supportive partner also contribute to a happy married life.

Many couples are able to find all the key ingredients in their marital relationships and are happy and satisfied with their married life. Others lack some elements in their bond which gives rise to consequences that are not always desired, e.g., depression in married women has found to be associated with younger age, lack of autonomy in marriage decisions, marital rape, and domestic abuse by in-laws (Ali, Israr, Ali, & Janjua, 2009).

One of the visible reasons why married couples find marriage as a threatening bond is that they face a number of problems while being in a relationship and also they are not capable enough to overcome or solve these problems. Lack of trust, mutual respect, communication, love, and understanding contribute to the deterioration of the bond. That is why couples face adverse consequences like divorce. A research showed that marital status especially divorce has a strong effect on mortality because of suicide among men only (Kposowa, 1999).

Religion and religious practices may also contribute to happy marriage. A study revealed husbands and wives to differ in their patterns of satisfaction. Husbands satisfaction was found to be more closely linked to ritual meanings and wives satisfaction was found to be associated with routine practices (Barbara & Thomas, 2001). Kieran (2001) concluded that religiosity also had an impact on attitude towards divorce, commitment, and help seeking behaviour among newly wedded couples. It also had a positive impact on marital satisfaction for couples with less neurotic husbands and a negative impact for couples with more neurotic husbands. Overall, the impact of religiosity was weak over the first four years of marriage.

Children are also an important ingredient of happy marriage. Couples who cannot have their own children mostly remain dissatisfied with their marital life and mostly such marriages end up in divorce or husband's second marriage. Both these situations contribute to further distress and dissatisfaction in life. Diagnosis of infertility is an important factor in assessing distress, and marital and sexual dissatisfaction between husbands and wives (Lee, Sun, & Chao, 2001).

The current study uses a qualitative approach using interpretative phenomenological analysis to investigate the experience of being happily married. It focuses on the factors that are considered most important for a happy and satisfied marital relationship and absence of which can cause serious problems and can lead to adverse consequences.

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Maria Fatima and Dr. M. Asir Ajmal, Government College University, Lahore.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Maria Fatima, Government College University, Lahore.  
Email: deepdesires\_26@hotmail.com

**Method**

**Procedure**

*Sample*

The sample consisted of a woman of 25 years who had an arranged marriage and considered herself happily married. Semi-structured interview was done with her to explore the factors she considered important for a happy and successful marriage.

Important interview questions were formulated and interview was taken with the participant’s consent. Her answers were recorded and the interview was later transcribed.

*Instrument*

*Semi-structured interview.* It was used as an information-gathering tool to investigate about the factors that are considered important for a happy marriage.

*Data analysis*

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was applied as a research method to interpret the participant’s experience of happy marriage and the factors contributing to it. Coding of the interview was done and categories were made. The sixteen categories emerged are given in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Categories emerged from IPA of happy married life

## Discussion

The study was done to see the elements contributing to a happy married life. Semi-structured interview was conducted from a woman of 25 years who was satisfied with her marriage. Sixteen categories emerged from IPA seemed to be very important for keeping a lasting happy marriage in the opinion and perception of the interviewee. These categories were Similarities of Religious Sect, Satisfaction, Compromise, Love, Care, Trust and Understanding, Communication, Age Difference, Sincerity and Respect, Sharing, Forgiveness, Spouse Temperament, Strength through Children, Family Structure, Education and Status, and Positive in-laws Relations.

Religious sect plays an important role in happy marriage. If the belief systems of two people are totally different, there would be conflicts between them. As the interviewee stated, *"Sectarian difference proves to be a hurdle in all kinds of steps of a happy marriage. It is because you do not have to compromise with the habits and personality but with the whole set of beliefs of the person which is sometimes difficult and often impossible. Also children of such parents remain confused throughout life"*.

Clash of beliefs have negative influence on children. These confusions and misunderstandings may also lead to serious clashes between the whole families and even separation or divorce between the couple. A study showed the risk of divorce to be elevated if husbands were more religious and wives were more conservative. Risk of divorce was found to be lower if both partners belonged to the same sect showing how similar sects impact the duration of marriage and how it keeps the relationship intact (Vaaler, Ellison, & Powers, 2009). Curtis and Ellison (2002) have concluded that husbands religiosity is inversely related to the frequency of disputes and disagreements over housework, money, and how time is spent. Sectarian dissimilarities among partners were also positively associated with the frequency of conflicts.

Satisfaction is also one of the most important factors that contribute to life in general and a happy married life in particular. The interviewee stated, *"Happiness and satisfaction go side by side. Satisfaction level determines your level of happiness and a satisfied life is a happy life"*.

If one of the spouse, either husband or wife, is not satisfied than he/she would not be able to be happy and enjoy life. A dissatisfied person always remains restless and jealous of other people. He is always trying to get more and more and is never thankful for whatever he has in his life. Health also contributes to marital satisfaction. It was found that in satisfied marriages, wives and husbands health was equivalent whereas in dissatisfied marriages, wives reported more mental and physical health problems than their husbands (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993). Unsatisfied spouse may have an extra-marital affair and may face very serious consequences like divorce so, marital satisfaction can lead to happiness and contentment which can result in being happily married.

Compromise plays a vital role in a prosperous married life. The interviewee said, *"Compromise, in my opinion, is very important as it helps to bear with each other's weaknesses, change of routine, and habits. I think, the one who compromises the most is happier"*.

Spouses may have different views, ideas, and needs. Compromising with these differences makes life easier for both partners. Spouses who respect each other's differences and do not

force each other to change an undesirable aspect of their personality and resort to compromise lead a better life. Changing oneself according to spouse's will can be frustrating which could give rise to conflicts.

Love has undeniable importance in a marital relationship because when two people are deeply in love with each other it is easy for them to compromise with each other's weaknesses and to forgive each other's mistakes. As interviewee stated,

*"When we love someone we cannot hurt and reject his/her wishes and demands and remain happy in whatever condition he/she keeps us"*.

People in love seldom hurt each other. If two married people are in love they would strive hard to keep their relationship smooth and healthy. They would take care of each other wholeheartedly and would work together to sought out their problems. Bachand and Caron (2001) concluded that the most commonly mentioned factors for a long happy marriage are friendship, love, and similar backgrounds or interests.

Care is a healthy expression of love. The interviewee reported, *"Care is a way of showing love to your partner. Serving him food, being dressed according to his choice, taking care of his likes and dislikes and giving importance to his desires shows that you care for him and love him and in turn he is even more caring and loving for you"*.

If two people love each other but don't express it verbally or through their gestures, it is very likely that misunderstandings would sprout up between them. Calling your spouse at work to check if they are okay, cooking food they like, attending them when they are sick, and other small gestures have a very positive effect on marital relationship.

We see in normal life that any relationship demands understanding between people. A good friendship is based on understanding between friends; a healthy parent-child relationship must involve understanding and so does a healthy sibling's relation. Similarly, to develop an understanding with one's spouse is very important in a marital relation. As the interviewee stated, *"I think good understanding lay the foundation of a happy marriage. Only by understanding your partner's moods, wishes, preferences, and expectations you can modify yourself accordingly and this makes a happy marriage"*.

Understanding spouse needs, what his/her expectations are, and how capable he/she is of fulfilling your expectations helps the relationship to grow. Understanding the person's strengths and weaknesses, his aspirations and apprehensions and his fears and hopes, makes it easier to live with that person and thus to have a smooth relationship with him. A research indicated that for wives the understanding of their husbands was the strongest predictor of their marriage (Acitelli, Douvan, & Veroff, 1993).

Trust is another important ingredient of happy marriage. The interviewee stated, *"Trust is one of the foundations of happy marriage and if the foundation is not good then the relationship won't last long. It is really hard to live with the person who doesn't trust you because he/she makes your life like hell. So, partners should learn to trust each other"*.

Trusting your partner's loyalty allows both spouses to be in peace. When you trust your partner you give him/her a certain degree of independence which proves healthy in any relationship. A distrustful partner can easily make his/her and his/her own partner's life miserable with his suspicions and doubts. It is also important that spouses trust each other's wisdom and the ability to make

decisions. Trusting your partner to do what is best for you and believing that he would not cause you any harm has a favorable effect on a relationship.

Effective communication is a key to a healthy relationship. The interviewee stated,

*"I believe that communication is helpful in solving many problems and prevents many problems to arise. If you communicate properly than your spouse would know better about you and effective communication makes your relationship stronger leaving little or no space for misunderstandings".*

If two people fail to communicate their feelings, desires, problems, and expectations their relationship may be adversely affected. Most people expect their life partners to understand them but they rarely communicate their problems to them, and when their spouses fail to understand they feel frustrated and angry and direct this aggression and frustration towards them. Talking to each other about the problems in the relationship may solve many of these problems. Communication also makes the relationship strong by decreasing the possibility of anyone else creating misunderstandings.

Age difference may affect a relationship though it could not be conclusively said whether it affects favorably or unfavorably as it varies among people. In our culture, it is commonly thought that problem usually arises when an older woman marries a younger man; however lesser problems are associated with an older man marrying a younger woman. Age difference between spouses in the latter case is perceived favorable as in our society men are responsible for the living and well-being of their family and a mature man can handle these responsibilities effectively. However, some people think that spouses should have less age differences so that they can develop a better understanding of each other. Large differences in age results in differences in mental level and preferences for spouses which may create problems for them. Age differences may also cause conflicts and misunderstandings. Another view favoring age difference is that spouse with less age difference may try to compete with each other. As the interviewee stated,

*"Very less and very large age difference is a hindrance in a happy marriage as it gives rise to many conflicts and misunderstandings".*

Sincerity and respect are vital for a healthy marital relationship. Two people cannot live happily with each other unless they are sincere to one another. The interviewee stated,

*"I have a simple formula no lies and no fights".*

Sincerity ensures that whatever you are doing for your spouse you are doing it whole-heartedly and without any sort of pressure from family or society. Spouses who are sincere with each other always think what is best for their partners and they support each other through any adverse circumstances. Respecting your partner is also very important. To value and respect your partner in front of family and society strengthens a relationship. As the interviewee reported,

*"I think if you do not respect your partner people will also stop respecting him and you as well and they usually make fun of such people. Couples who are disrespectful to each other face many problems and if they do not correct themselves serious problems may arise".*

Sharing your personal belongings with somebody else shows your trust in that person and your level of commitment. Absence of sharing may result in selfishness on part of one partner or both. This can cause immense problems in a relationship. Moreover, sharing one's problems and worries with one's spouse help build trust. Sharing each other's views and interests is also very beneficial. As

interviewee stated,

*"Sharing with your spouse makes your relationship stronger, trustful, unbreakable, and brings partners closer to each other".*

Happy marital relationships also requires partners to forgive each other's mistakes. Forgiving someone shows that you love and care for that person even if he/she makes a mistake. It shows the acceptance of flaws the other person has. The interviewee stated,

*"Happy marriage is based on forgiving each other. By forgiving you feel relaxed and lighter. Your spouse is your better half and if you cannot forgive your better half how could you be in peace. So for happy life one has to be forgiving".*

If spouses hold blunders made by their life partners against them and keep grudges in their heart then it would cause problems for the couple. A study has shown forgiveness to be important in emotional well-being, physical health, and good marital relationships (Fincham, Hall, & Beach, 2006).

Spouse temperament is another factor that plays an important part in marital relationships. The interviewee reported,

*"I think at least one of the spouse should be good tempered because if both partners keep on losing temper on small things their married life would be unpleasant. One should learn to ignore other's mistakes in order to keep peace and harmony in life".*

If both spouses are aggressive and short tempered, more fights are likely to happen and the effect on the relationship would be unpleasant. At least one of the partners should have a calm demeanor so that during a fight he could prevent anything rash from happening. A study showed that participants with more pleasant temperaments and those who had mates with more pleasant temperaments were happier in their marriages. However, unpleasant wives were highly dissatisfied with their marriage (Blum & Mehrabian, 1999).

In our culture women usually feel stronger in their marital relationships after they become mothers. It is very difficult for a man to divorce a woman who is mother of his children. After kids are born, women think that their relation with their husbands has strengthened as they feel protected by the fact that now the man is bounded by two relationships one that of a husband and the other of a father. Thus, children also play an important role in strengthening their parents relationship. As the interviewee stated,

*"Children strengthen relationship between spouses. A mother feels stronger and more secure with her children".*

Effects of family structure on a couple vary. Generally for couples who are mature and have self-sufficient nuclear system works just fine however, for immature young people who are more prone to fighting and who lack understanding of how to resolve their relationship issues, joint family system may be favorable. In a joint family system, families share each other's problems and burdens. The elders in a joint family system can intervene when necessary in a fight between the couple to avoid harsh consequences. However, many people see this intervention as an unwelcome interference and thus this may lead to further problems. The interviewee stated,

*"In-laws play a vital role. They help in adjustment and understanding of the spouse but if they are not good, divorce is more likely the outcome".*

Education and status is important in a relationship though it is not guaranteed that education will give you morality and sense of dealing with others. In our society, there are many examples where educated people are seen to treat their spouses in a very unpleasant way. Still educated people are generally more cultured and groomed than uneducated people; this is why most people while looking for a

spouse, set education as a standard. Another thing is that good education ensures a good job and thus better living conditions. As far as status is concerned, it cannot be denied that good living conditions may help a relationship grow. Financial crisis or scarcity of resources usually cause stress among people and relationship between them is likely to be effected negatively. However, couples that are content with their status are more likely to have a prosperous relationship even if they have a low socio-economic situation. To find happiness compromising with your situation is necessary. In the start when relationship is fragile, the status of a person may play a role in strengthening it but with the passage of time as the relation strengthens and the partners begin to understand and care for each other, their relationship may survive economic crisis. However, education may play a part throughout life as educated people are generally more groomed and less likely to fight regarding silly things but this is also a fact that better education of a person does not necessarily give him a sense of morality. As the interviewee said,

*“Although education grooms personality and makes a person sensible but it cannot be said for sure that higher education ensures happy marital relationships as educated people are also divorced or separated. Same is true for social status. It all depends on how the person compromises and tries to find happiness in whatever sources he/she has”.*

It is commonly said that marriage does not result only in formation of a relationship between two people rather it's a bond between two families. Spouses should respect each other's families. In our culture, in-laws of a woman play a vital role in the mutual relationship of husband and wife as a wife has to live not only with her husband but also with his family. If in-laws are mean and unkind they can cause several problems. This would ultimately result in adverse effects on husband-wife relationship. But if in-laws are caring and understanding they can contribute in flourishing the relationship. When two people enter a new relationship they do not understand each other much, at this time in-laws can provide help to both of them to understand one another and thus can play an active part in making their relationship strong or weak by creating misunderstandings in case of non-supporting in-laws.

When a relationship is in its beginning phase, few aspects are more important than the others. Firstly, family structure plays an important part in the beginning of a relationship. When a girl comes to live in a new family set up she has to adjust to many things. The role of in-laws is also essential in giving a comfortable home environment to the girl. Showing sincerity and respect for your life partner also helps a marital relation to prosper as it helps in gaining trust. Spouse temperament may affect the relationship in the beginning as it may hinder or facilitate the healthy growth of a relationship. With the passage of time people get used to each other's temperaments and develop an understanding of how to tackle moods of one another. In the beginning of a relationship woman usually feels insecure and seeks a sense of security through her children but gradually as the relationship progresses the relation between spouses becomes strong. Compromise is also important in the beginning. This gives relationship a chance to grow. If the couple starts fighting over their differences in the very beginning, the relationship may come to an end. With the passage of time, partners accept each other's differences and compromise operates on automatic mode. Importance of education and status is also undeniable because people usually prefer to marry an educated person or a person of higher socio-economic status.

Some aspects prove themselves to be important for a relationship

in the long run. Most important of these aspects are trust and understanding. When a couple gains each other's trust and develops a high level of understanding their relationship is generally full of happiness. Age difference also affects the relationship in the long run as it becomes more pronounced with the passage of time. This results in the creation of new differences in a settled relationship. At this point the reaction of spouses towards these differences determines the course of relationship. Satisfaction of people with their marital relationship is also effective in the long run. People usually spend the first phase of their relationship trying to understand each other and to get adjusted, it is only later that they begin to question how satisfied they are with their marriage. Dissatisfaction may result in extramarital affairs that have catastrophic effects. Love and care also strengthen a relationship over time. Effect of communication also becomes visible over a period of time, good communication between partners may result in a strong relationship, however its absence may create many misunderstandings that would grow with the passage of time and may cause disastrous effects. Inter-sect marriages usually happen as a result of prior understanding and feelings of love between two people. These people are in love so in the beginning of their marriage the differences in their sects hardly matter but as the time passes these sectarian differences begin to affect their relationship. Problems may arise regarding whose sect the children would follow. Sharing and forgiveness also makes a marital relationship happy and long lasting.

### *Conclusion*

The study was done to see the elements necessary for a happy married life. From the interview conducted it is clear that there are several factors important for a happier and lasting marriage, e.g., similarities of religious sects, satisfaction, compromise, love, care, trust and understanding, communication, forgiveness, relation with in-laws and family structure. Although all the above mentioned factors are necessary for a happy marital life and their absence can cause serious problems but how a person rates these factors and how much importance he/she gives to each of them varies from person to person depending upon the culture the person belongs to. For example, in most of the Eastern countries good relations with in-laws is considered very important in a happy married life but in Western countries these factors are not considered that important. So, the importance of these factors varies from individual to individual and also from culture to culture.

### *Limitations and Suggestions*

The sample size of the study is very small as these are the views of only one participant, therefore results are not generalizable. A study with a large sample size can be done and cultural differences can also be taken into account to study how the experience of happy marriage varies from culture to culture.

### *Implications*

The study has wide implications for married people, as they could rate the factors they consider important for their happy marriage and could struggle to bring them in their life to have a satisfactory and happy married life. The study is also beneficial for

marriage counselors.

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