

**Spouse Selection Criteria through the Perspective of Satisfied Individuals with Marriage during their Engagement Period: A Qualitative Study**

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**Extended Abstract**

**1. Introduction**

Marriage is the first step towards the formation of a family and one of the most important choices of individuals throughout their lifetime; a satisfying, lasting marriage can guarantee the health and stability of a society (Sommer & Justino, 2015). Various studies have asserted the role of making informed choices in marriage satisfaction. Nevertheless, a variety of factors including personal and interpersonal problems have transformed rapid social, economic, and cultural developments in families where making proper choices has become difficult (Alawi et al., 2014).

Studies show that the majority of divorces take place during the first 3-5 years of marriage and 50% of such cases occur during the engagement period (Daneshpour et al., 2011). Divorce is considered as the second stressful lifetime event that brings about reduced occupational productivity (Blekesaune & Barrett, 2005), physical problems (Robles, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 2003), and psychological distress (Comerford, 2006).

Given the aforementioned challenges and to examine this notion of culture at the first stage of family formation, i.e. the engagement period, it has been attempted to

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take a closer look at preventive measures and purposes behind the criteria for selecting a spouse from the perspective of individuals who have recently passed the selection stage and are satisfied by it.

## **2. Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework**

Many majors including evolutionary biology, sociology, and psychology have paid attention to studying various areas related to spouse selection criteria. According to the biologic theory, humans instinctively strive for maximizing their gene reproduction likelihood. Consequently, when choosing a spouse, men are mostly attracted to physical traits including age and attractiveness which are signs that ensure women's fertility. Meanwhile, women mostly pay attention to the resources and position of their future spouse (Gustavsson, 2008). According to the homogamy theory (Boss, 1986) and selection based on complementarity (Winch, 1958), individuals are inclined to selecting mates similar to or different from themselves (Strickland, 2006). In the socialization theory, parental effects (esp. opposite sex parent) on choosing a spouse are emphasized (Bolhuis & Horn, 1992; quoted from Barzaki, 2004). Similar views are expressed in the theory of unconscious choice. Based on this theory, one does not choose another for marriage exclusively due to their physical attractiveness, capabilities or similarity with an individual; while the selected mates might represent important people from one's childhood (Hendrix, 2005).

Spouse selection criteria involve different meanings in different cultures and periods. Therefore, a culture-dependent process is involved in selecting a life partner (Kaufman, 2012; Alawi et al., 2014). However, the majority of studies in this area are conducted using quantitative methods with single individuals as the target population. Yet on the other hand, qualitative studies are better options for examining the phenomena influenced by culture and ever-changing aspects. Moreover, the experiences gained by those who have recently and successfully passed through this stage can offer individuals who are about to get married more accurate information on selection criteria and examining their possible transformations under such experiences.

## **3. Method**

The present study was conducted using the qualitative method and thematic analysis. Participants were selected among individuals living in Mashhad and spending the engagement period using purposive sampling and selection was continued until theoretical saturation. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 20 individuals (12 women and 8 men who were content with marriage based on their own reports). Data were collected during a 1-year period and analyzed based on Braun and Clark's (2006) reciprocating process, including

six stages of implementation, repeated review and immersion in data, creating initial codes, searching the themes, defining and naming, and ultimately, report writing.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

Out of the 650 initial codes, the following 3 main categories and 14 secondary categories were extracted:

1. Personal characteristics (320 codes) with 5 subcategories of characteristic features (209 codes), demographic features (39 codes), appearance features (37 codes), belief features (30 codes), and physical-mental health (8 codes);
2. Relationship characteristics (156 codes) with 4 subcategories including similarities and differences (79 codes), recognition (45 codes), interest (18 codes) and acceptance of conditions and agreements (14 codes);
3. Family characteristics (99 codes) with 6 subcategories of congruence and similarities (35 codes), intimate relationships (25 codes), prominent features (13 codes), family's agreement (10 codes), healthy role models (9 codes), and demographic features (7 codes).

Findings offer evidence in confirming both theories of homogamy and selection based on complementarity. In line with many studies including Botuin et al. (2006), Maliki (2009), Husseinkhanzadeh et al. (2015), participants expected similarity in many of the areas as a criterion for selecting their spouses; yet in certain features, difference appeared to be desirable as it would complete them.

Women also emphasized having a proper job and sufficient income as an important criterion which is in line with the evolutionary theory. One of the different findings of the study involved women's priority in finding physical beauty as a significant criterion equal to that of men. This distinguished result requires more sociological and psychological examinations and denote changes in individuals' perspective toward marriage criteria. In addition, the majority of women participating in this study expected their future spouse to be distanced from traditional and prejudicial beliefs, refuse to limit the women from social activities and be more involved with house chores. Bourne (2006) believes that gender-related ideologies are transformed towards equality in general, while men have been slower in showing their changes in perspective towards women (Rajabi et al., 2011).

#### 5. Conclusion

Today, the developments resulted from modernity has transformed social homogeneity of the past into social distinction. Therefore, contrary to the past, not only the members of various strata of the society, but also the individuals in a kinship network or a family do not have similar beliefs. This has been clearly

manifested in spouse selection in the form of differences in insights and criteria among various generations (Abdulmaleki et al., 2015). Another part of changes in the currently shifting Iranian society is due to the collapse of traditional collectivist structures and realization of individualism which has introduced profound developments in individuals' traits (Kermani et al, 2018). The results of this study are in line with the above-mentioned research as well as the study by Nikparvar et al (1390) which demonstrates that the transfiguration of family from a an extensive entity into a core collective has diminished the common patterns of the past based upon the dominance of families over marriage whilst highlighting the role of the individual in decision-making.

Conflict of expectations in the gender-related ideology's shift towards equality can be explained using views related to "power" and "structure". Malek Asgar et al. (2014) concluded that the women from the second and third generations of the society possess more imperatives with respect to fair distribution of power in the family. The traditional marriage placed men in a superior position over women where change would be accompanied by withdrawal behaviors from men. The formation of this "demand-withdrawal" cycle was the result of gender-based power and is related to the relations and extent of power balance between the man and the woman (Shahmoradi et al., 2014).

These findings can offer those involved in the area of marriage a more extensive horizon where they would be able to update their interventions according to the ever-changing conditions of the society; they can also contribute to building healthier relationships by asserting the important factors in spouse selection which considerably predicts satisfaction following marriage.

**Keywords:** Marriage Criteria, Engagement Period, Thematic Analysis, Qualitative Method

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