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Original Article

Investigation of Factors Affecting the Marital Intimacy of Veteran Couples: A Qualitative Study

Parisa Hariri¹ , Ozra Etemadi^{2*} , Ahmad Abedi³ 

1. PhD Candidate, Department of Psychology, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Isfahan, Iran
2. Associate Professor, Department of Counseling, School of Education and Psychology, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran
3. Associate Professor, Department of Psychology and Education of children with Special Needs, School of Education and Psychology, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

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Ozra Etemadi

Email:

o.etemadi@edu.ui.ac.ir

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Abstract

Introduction: Intimacy is especially important in married life. The objective of this study was to investigate the factors affecting the marital intimacy of veteran couples.

Methods: This qualitative study was conducted using a phenomenological approach. The study population consisted of veteran couples in Shiraz. Sampling was done purposively and continued until the saturation point was reached. The data were collected from 10 semi-structured interviews with veteran couples on intimacy and Colaizzi's method was used to analyze the data.

Results: Factors affecting the marital intimacy of veteran couples were extracted in the form of 4 categories and 17 sub-categories. The identified categories included individual factors (personality traits, attachment styles, differentiation, physical and mental health), interpersonal factors (communication patterns, communication skills, matching and similarity, conflict resolution styles, emotional and sexual needs), religious and cultural factors (religious beliefs and attitudes, interaction with in-laws), and demographic factors (education, occupation, economic status, presence of children, duration of marriage, gender).

Conclusion: Marital intimacy of veteran couples is influenced by individual, interpersonal, religious and cultural, and demographic factors. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to different factors affecting marital intimacy in the counseling of veteran couples. The present study can be a good guide for therapists to provide appropriate interventions to increase intimacy.

Keywords: Marital intimacy, Veteran couples, Qualitative research

Introduction

War as a factor of intense tension has far-reaching individual, economic, social, and cultural consequences. In addition to the fact that the injured person is mentally disturbed, the family environment and family cohesion are

also in danger as a result (1). The effects of war are not only exerted on survivors suffering physical or mental disorders or injuries. War also affects families and caregivers as secondary victims (2). The devastating effects of war tensions on the families of those involved in the war, especially their spouses, continue long after

the war (3). One area of the veteran's life that may have been affected by the war and its long-term consequences is the intimacy of the veteran couple (4).

Intimacy is an interactive process and includes components that are related to each other. Intimacy is a feeling of closeness and connection that is developed and raised through relationships between spouses (5). Couples who have more intimacy are more capable of dealing with problems and changes related to their relationship, and as a result, experience higher marital adjustment, satisfaction, and quality (6). Waring sees couple's intimacy as a combination of emotion, expressiveness, compatibility, solidarity, sexuality, conflict resolution, independence, and identity (7).

In her research entitled "*Increasing marital intimacy*", Etemadi pointed out that intimacy includes similarity, acceptance of self-disclosure, sexuality, independence, adaptation, and emotional-physical and mental intimacy. Moreover, solving the problems related to the couple's relationship history, communication patterns, attachment styles, behavioral skills training, and conflict resolution, increases the couple's intimacy (8).

Various studies have pointed to the factors affecting the intimacy of couples. The results of the research by Jaberi et al. on married women in Isfahan showed that personality traits, attachment styles, communication skills, communication patterns, conflict resolution styles, and pathology of relationship with the spouse's family are among the predictors of marital intimacy (9). Etemadi et al. Showed in their research that there is a significant relationship between communication skills, communication patterns, and conflict resolution styles with marital intimacy (10). One of the most important principles in a

successful marriage is to satisfy the mutual needs of the couple, which strengthens the loving relationship and increases intimacy between them (11). Negative interactions between spouses and the spouse's family can affect the intimacy and stability of the marital relationship (12).

Numerous therapies have been used by researchers to influence the intimacy of couples. Babapour et al. examined the effect of cognitive-behavioral skills on marital satisfaction and intimacy of veteran couples (13) and Sharifian et al. investigated the effect of couples communication program training on intimacy and quality of life of dissatisfied women (14). The results indicated that the skills and techniques of these therapeutic approaches affect the components of marital intimacy and increase couple intimacy.

In a qualitative study, Weigl found that improving core family injuries, communication skills, and conflict resolution increased marital satisfaction and improved behavioral conflicts (15). Conflict resolution skills help couples to have a realistic view of issues, see differences as a problem and challenge, and feel intimacy with each other (16,17). Heydari and Eqhbal studied couples in Ahwaz and found that there is a multiple relationship between difficulty in regulating emotion, attachment styles, intimacy, and marital satisfaction (18). In their research on women, Nasr Isfahani et al. found that self-awareness and emotional intelligence are the best predictors of marital intimacy (19).

Examination of various studies has shown the relationship between demographic characteristics, including age, race, income, education, duration of marriage, and degree of religiosity with marital adjustment and satisfaction (20). Economic fluctuations that

lead to reduced incomes and job losses in the community will cause the family to face serious problems such as incompatibility between husband and wife, family breakdown, violence, and aggression between spouses (21).

Discovering the factors affecting the marital intimacy of veteran couples and managing them is one of the noteworthy methods in solving problems and achieving satisfaction in their married life. Therefore, recognizing these factors not only helps the couple's therapist to diagnose the problems, but also helps the couple to create, strengthen, or correct them and achieve intimacy by recognizing these factors. Furthermore, due to the annual increase in divorce rates, the existence of a problem in the intimate relationship between couples is the most important factor. Besides, the adverse effects of intimacy problems on the lives of couples and children and the need to recognize and find effective solutions to increase the intimacy of veteran couples are some of the reasons that show the importance of this study. Therefore, the present study sought to answer the question of what factors are effective in the marital intimacy of veteran couples.

Methods

This research used a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach and was conducted in Shiraz in 2018. Phenomenology is the most appropriate method for deep understanding of the experiences as well as the meaning of a complex and multidimensional concept. Phenomenology pays attention to the basic elements of experiences in people's daily lives, and therefore experience is the central focus of this method. In this

method, information is collected from people who have experienced the phenomenon, and then the obtained information is analyzed. As the information is narrowed down to achieving important and meaningful data, the researcher develops a detailed and structural description of the experiences of individuals. In other words, this research used a descriptive-analytical approach to investigate the narratives of the interviewees (22).

The participants in this study were veteran couples in Shiraz. Sampling was conducted purposively and continued until the saturation point was reached. The inclusion criteria were having a veteran percentage above 25% confirmed by Martyr Foundation and Veterans Affairs of Shiraz, being willing to participate voluntarily and signing an informed consent form, having no clinical or personality disorders, non-drug use and no alcohol addiction, and having no severe family disputes. Prior to the interview, participants' permission was obtained to record audio and they were ensured that the information was kept confidential and that they could withdraw from the interview at any time.

After providing sufficient explanations about the nature and objectives of the research to the participants and obtaining their written consent, the interviews were conducted. Interview questions included: What is your definition of marital intimacy? What are the symptoms of intimacy for you? What are the barriers to your intimacy? The duration of the interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 60 minutes. Interviews were immediately transcribed verbatim and the 7-step Colaizzi method was used for data analysis. The first step was to provide an overview of all the information. At this point, the written information about the

interviews was read several times to understand its general content. This was done by listening to portions of the recorded information. In the second step, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs related to the questions asked in the interviews were extracted and kept in separate files. This was done so as not to lose information that was less important as its importance might be clear in later stages. The third step was creating formulated meanings. For each important sentence, a short description of the hidden meaning was written. This process was performed by two people separately and then, the meanings extracted from the sentences were combined to obtain a common meaning. The fourth step was putting the formulated meanings inside the subcategories and shaping the subclasses into different categories. At this stage, the short phrases and sentences that were formulated from the meanings were classified separately into the categories and then discussed by each of the people who completed the fourth stage. Repetition of phrases is one of the indicators of credibility. To determine the validity of the data at this stage, a competent individual matched the obtained statements with the information. The fifth step was creating a brief narrative description in which the key concepts of the information, which were unanimously selected by the researchers, were written in a narrative summary. Narrative description is to express the findings in the form of unambiguous summarized sentences. Then, the second person, together with the researcher, corrected them. The sixth step was returning the data for validation. To do this, the results were described to the participants and they were asked to present their comments and reactions to the results.

The seventh step was determining the traceability to do which the daily activities of the research process were written by the researcher in the form of a written report and the personal experiences of the researchers in dealing with the participants were recorded. In order to achieve the accuracy and validity of the study, the presented criteria, namely credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were considered and used by the research group. The researcher with her long-term presence, participation, and interaction with participants, collecting credible information, and seeking to verify information by participants tried to increase the credibility of the research. Step-by-step repetition, data collection and analysis, and the reviews by the supervisor, consultant, and experts were done to increase data dependability. In order to increase the confirmability of the data, the approval of the faculty members and their supplementary comments were used. Transferability was assured by trying to provide a rich description of the research report to evaluate the applicability of data in other fields, so that other researchers can understand the experience of veteran couples on marital intimacy and the quotes of the participants were presented as mentioned. Researchers set aside their assumptions about the phenomenon under study to help strengthen their data.

Results

Examples and definitions that veteran couples have had of intimacy and factors affecting it included 17 subcategories: personality traits, attachment styles, differentiation, physical and mental health, communication patterns, communication

skills, matching and similarity, conflict resolution styles, emotional and sexual needs, religious beliefs and attitudes, interaction with in-laws, education, occupation, economic status, presence of children, duration of marriage, and gender. It also included four categories: individual factors, interpersonal factors, religious and cultural factors, and demographic factors.

Individual factors

Analysis of the interviews conducted with veteran couples on marital intimacy led to the extraction of an effective topic in marital intimacy of couples, which is called individual factors. Individual factors include personality traits, attachment styles, differentiation, and physical and mental health as presented in Figure 1.

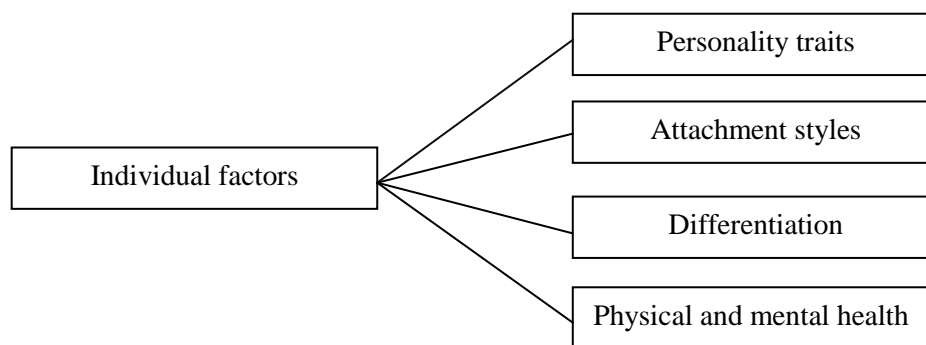


Figure 1. Individual factors affecting intimacy

Personality traits

One of the factors extracted from the analysis of the texts of the interviews conducted on marital intimacy of veteran couples was personality traits of individuals. This factor included kindness and good morals, responsibility, self-disclosure, flexibility, criticism, and so on. For further clarification, examples of the participants' statements in this regard are provided: "My husband is honest, he does not hide anything. He is kind to me and the children. He does what he's responsible for. He helps with household chores. He takes care of the children's homework" (Participant 7). "He is not responsible at all, everything is up to me. He is very harsh both with me and with the children. He hardly buys anything for us even though he has money. He is mostly on his own, he does not talk to us much" (Participant 10).

Attachment styles

In the study of the experiences of the couples, one of the factors that could be identified in most experiences was attachment styles. Many couples considered factors such as having a good relationship with their parents, not having conflicts, expressing love and affection, and in general, the positive effects that they understood from their original family, to be effective in intimacy with their spouse. An example of the participants' statements in this regard is provided for further explanation: "My husband does not show any love to me or the children at all. He has not kissed or hugged children since they got a little older. He is very bigoted and does not allow them to approach him" (Participant 2). "My husband is not with me whenever I need him. I always feel lonely. He goes out when I feel lonely or we fight. He is not willing to listen to me and my

children at all” (Participant 9). “My wife is skeptical; she constantly checks me. When I am out, she calls me many times to ask where I am. She is always after me” (Participant 9).

Differentiation

Analysis of the texts of the interviews showed that another factor influencing the marital intimacy of veteran couples is differentiation. A number of couples have pointed out that being independent and aware of their feelings about their spouse plays an important role in increasing their intimacy. Examples of participants' statements in this regard will provide more clarity. “The problem is that my wife can't make her own decisions. She always does what her family says” (Participant 1). “My husband's family is constantly involved in our lives and they decide for us. If I do not do it, they will complain to my husband and then a fight will be settled” (Participant 8). “When I go to my mother-in-law's house, if my mother-in-law says something that I do not like or I am upset about, when we come home, my husband says do not take it to heart, she should not say this, he does not support them, he tries to calm me down” (Participant 3).

Physical and mental health

Analysis of the texts of the interviews conducted with veteran couples on marital intimacy showed that veteran couples suffer from physical problems and intrapersonal psychological disorders which strongly affect couples' interactions and ultimately their intimacy. “Part of my husband's injury is related to his nerves. There are fragments inside his head. Sometimes he gets sick and breaks everything in front of him. It also affected my nerves and those of my children” (Participant 6). A sample of participants' statements in this regard is presented: “My husband is a veteran and he has physical problems. I have to do a lot of his work too. This puts a lot of pressure on me and I get stressed. I feel too tired and helpless. One of the problems for us, veteran spouses, is that not only do they not help most of the time, they do not even manage their own affairs” (Participant2).

Interpersonal factors

The analysis of the texts and interviews with veteran couples in the field of marital interactions and intimacy led to the extraction of the main category of interpersonal factors, which includes 5 subcategories as presented in Figure 2.

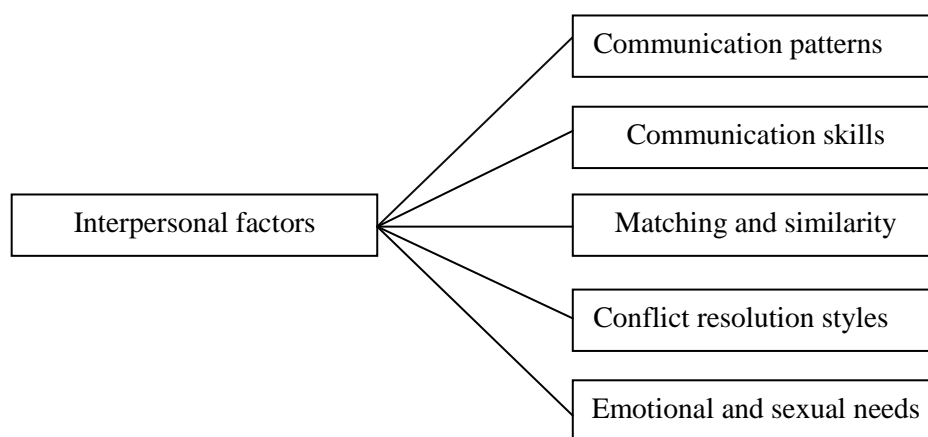


Figure 2. Interpersonal factors affecting intimacy

Communication patterns

The analysis of the texts and lived experiences of veteran couples showed that one of the influential factors in relation to marital intimacy of couples is communication patterns. The most common pattern of communication between spouses, which was considered an obstacle to intimacy, was withdrawal and anger during problems and after that. Adopting aggression by each spouse was also considered as the second obstacle to intimacy. In order to be more transparent, some examples of participants' sentences are mentioned: *"My husband can't stand hearing my words and opinions and those of the children. He gets mad quickly. He always wants to speak for himself. He does not listen to me at all"* (Participant 10). *"My husband gets angry when I speak against his opinion and goes to his mother's house. Sometimes he even stays for two weeks"* (Participant 2). *"There are always fights when arguing. My job is to cry. He shouts and smashes things. The children are afraid of him and go to the room. I'm scared too. He attacks me and beats me"* (Participant 10).

Communication skills

The study of the participants' experiences showed that the lack of communication skills in veteran couples was an important factor affecting their marital intimacy. Communication skills were described by spouses with behaviors such as mutual understanding, expressing feelings of non-criticism, and correct understanding of the message. A few examples of what the participants said in this regard are presented: *"I accept and love my husband as he is. I always thank him because life revolves around his income. I strongly advise children to respect their father. I always tell*

the children to ask their father's opinion about their decisions. I will not allow children to disrespect their mother" (Participant 5). Another participant stated: *"My wife always insults me and the children. She does not know how to speak correctly at all. She always digs thing up. She looks us in the eye, brings the past issues ahead, and does not understand the children"* (Participant 8).

Matching and similarity

The study of the participants' experiences showed the compatibility and similarity of veteran couples in various aspects, including cultural, economic, and social. Here are some examples of participants' statements in this regard: *"One of the main problems for me and my husband is that he does not think like me at all. They are Turks and I am Persian. His family does not understand my language at all. They have some customs that are not acceptable to me and I always have problems with these customs and ways of thinking. They do not understand me at all"* (Participant 2).

Conflict resolution styles

Another major issue affecting the marital intimacy of veteran couples, which was obtained from the analysis of the texts of the interviews, is the conflict resolution styles of the couple. Forgiveness, cooperation in solving problems, and talking about misunderstandings were among the methods obtained from interviewing the couple. The following are some of the participants' lived experiences in this regard: *"We need to be able to control our anger and not hurt ourselves or others. But my wife cannot control herself, she is very aggressive"* (Participant 1). *"Because I understand my husband's conditions, I try to forget and forgive"* (Participant 6).

Emotional and sexual needs

Satisfaction of emotional and sexual needs, care, security, and love were the factors that were obtained from the analysis of the texts of the interviews with veteran couples. The following is an example of the participants' lived experiences: *"My husband is a veteran and he has sexual problems that made me depressed even after years of being together. After going to the doctor, it became clear that the cause was sexual problems. After my husband and I followed the treatment recommended by the doctor, my condition*

improved and our intimacy and relationship became stronger" (Participant 4).

Religious and cultural factors

The other topic explored in the life experiences of veteran couples that affected their marital intimacy was religious and cultural factors. Intimate couples believed that adherence to religious and cultural beliefs strengthens marital relationships. Figure 3 shows the religious and cultural factors affecting the intimacy of veteran couples.

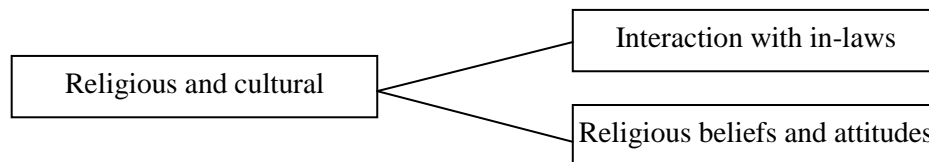


Figure 3. Religious and cultural factors affecting intimacy

Religious beliefs and attitudes

Analysis of the texts of the interviews conducted on the marital intimacy of veteran couples led to the extraction of another sub-topic entitled religious beliefs and attitudes. Most emphasis was placed by veteran couples on the degree of religiousness and cultural class. For example, one of the participants stated: *"I'm a veteran and I have problems. Everything I do in my life, I consider God. My goal is for God to be pleased with me. I seek refuge in God in hardships and difficulties to give me peace. I ask God to help me to be patient in life and endure my husband's problems"* (Participant 5).

harms that the spouse's family can have for the couple, were introduced as effective factors in the couple's intimacy by veteran couples. The following is an example of the statements and lived experiences of veteran couples in this regard: *"My husband's family interferes in our lives out of pity. My husband listens to his mother and his family's words are more important to him than mine."* (Participant 8). *"My mother-in-law fully knows what we eat and say in our house from morning till night. In the morning, my wife calls her mother and asks her what to do during the day. She reports to her two or three times until nightfall"* (Participant 1).

Interaction with in-laws

Another issue affecting the marital intimacy of veteran couples, which was obtained from the analysis of the texts of the interviews, was the relationship with the spouse's family. Incorrect communication with the in-laws as well as inappropriate interventions and

Demographic factors

The analysis of the interview texts indicated that demographic factors were effective in creating and increasing marital intimacy. These factors included education, occupation, economic status, presence of children, duration of marriage, and gender (Figure 4).

Examples of couples' statements concerning demographic factors are presented as follows: "My husband's economic status and low salary have made me lose my temper. I do not know how to manage my life with my

spouse's treatment costs and the children's expenses" (Participant 2). "The financial issues and the demands of the children and my wife have often caused us to quarrel" (Participant 10).

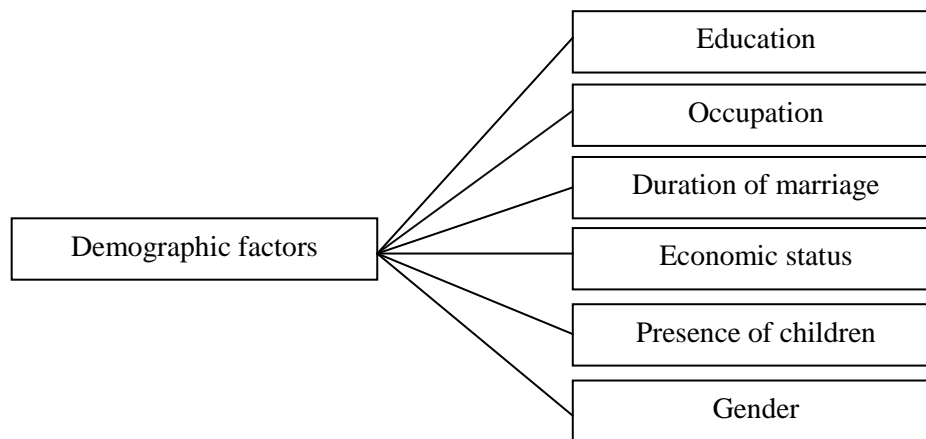


Figure 4. Demographic Factors affecting Intimacy

Discussion

The present study was conducted to explore the factors affecting the marital intimacy of veteran couples. The information obtained from the interviews with 10 veteran couples led to the identification of four main concepts including individual, interpersonal, religious and cultural, and demographic factors affecting the marital intimacy of veteran couples. The findings of the study by Jaberi et al. considering personality traits, attachment styles, communication patterns, communication skills, conflict resolution styles, and relationship with spouse's family as predictors of marital intimacy in married women (9), are consistent with the results of this study. Moreover, the findings of the present study on individual factors affecting the intimacy of veteran couples are consistent with the results of the study by Heydari and Eghbal on the effect of attachment styles and emotion regulation skills on increasing intimacy (18) as well as Nasr Isfahani's et al results on the effect of

self-awareness and emotional intelligence on marital intimacy (19). The findings of Etemadi's research, which consider intimacy to include acceptance, self-disclosure, independence, and emotional-physical and mental intimacy (8), are also consistent with the findings of this study. In explaining the above results, it can be said that individual factors affect the marital intimacy of veteran couples. Veterans suffer from negative emotions such as anger, hatred, and depression due to chronic and long-term physical and mental injuries. People with secure attachment styles and a higher level of differentiation, acceptance, and physical and mental health, can manage their stressful living conditions with their veteran spouse and, in addition to resisting the difficulties and hardships of life, they can reach a new level of growth and increase intimacy.

Regarding interpersonal factors, the findings of the present study are consistent with those of the study by Etemadi et al. investigating the relationship between communication

skills, communication patterns, and conflict resolution styles with marital intimacy of women (10). Furthermore, the results obtained from the present study are consistent with those of the studies by Weigle (15), Weiss (16), and Dildar et al. (17). They found that childhood attachment styles and interpersonal skills, including conflict resolution styles and communication skills, increase intimacy in couples. Besides, the findings of this study are consistent with those reported by Etemadi on the effect of matching and similarity between couples in relation to intimacy and also increasing their intimacy through behavioral skills training and conflict resolution skills (8). In explaining the second category which refers to interpersonal factors including communication patterns, communication skills, matching and similarity, conflict resolution styles, and emotional and sexual needs, it can be said that people's communication background is formed during their lives. People's communication skills are like lenses through which they look at everything that happens in their lives. The more people are aware of these lenses, the better and more meaningful the communication will be. Conflict between couples is normal. Couples who see conflict as an opportunity to improve their relationship will not be afraid of it and will not be harmed (23). Similarities in gender, ethnicity, geography, income, occupation, class, religion, education, personality, and age can lead to intimacy and increase the consistency and stability of married life (23).

Other factors affecting the intimacy of veteran couples in the present study are religious and cultural factors that are consistent with the findings of Knox and Schacht (20). Religion provides a context and perspective for people to focus on their goals rather than on fleeting attractions.

Faith for these people is a guide for daily actions related to morality, cohesion, relationships, love, finances and other things. Couples who are culturally, ethnically, and racially diverse also have different expectations and beliefs about marital relationships (24). It can be said that people with stronger religious beliefs can overcome difficulties and increase their level of intimacy with their spouse when faced with severe pressures. Faith has become a greater power or a meta-spiritual connection that gives new meaning to their lives. Religious beliefs are also considered as a support for increasing the intimacy of veteran couples. Religious beliefs and having a good relationship with the spouse's family at all stages of life are two preventive factors to reduce mental disorders, anxiety, anger, guilt, and insecurity and increase intimacy.

Ghasemi et al. also showed in their research that negative interactions between couples and their in-laws can affect the couple's relationship and its stability (12), which confirms the results of this study. Interactive harms to the couple and the spouse's family disrupt the relationship between the couple and the spouse's family, destroy intimacy and love between them, deprive the parties of peace of mind, and may even cause irreparable damage to marital life.

The last category explored in the present study was demographic factors. Studies have introduced some demographic factors such as type of marriage, age of marriage, presence of children, education and occupation, economic status, and social status as factors affecting marital intimacy (20, 21).

It is suggested that experts make interventions to increase the marital intimacy of couples with accordance to the special characteristics

of veteran couples and their needs as well as the features of the Iranian culture. It is recommended that future researches be carried out based on structural equations to investigate the structural relationships of factors affecting the marital intimacy of veteran couples. It is also suggested that in future research, in addition to qualitative methods, quantitative and mixed methods be used to collect information. One of the limitations of the present study was the lack of previous research on the factors affecting the intimacy of veteran couples. Moreover, considering that the research was conducted in Shiraz and the population under the study was made up of veterans, caution should be exercised in generalizing the results to other cities with different cultural and demographic factors.

Conclusion

Individual factors affecting the marital intimacy of veteran couples extracted from the lived experiences of veteran couples included personality traits, attachment styles, differentiation, and physical and mental

health. Interpersonal factors affecting the marital intimacy of veteran couples were communication patterns, communication skills, matching and similarity, conflict resolution styles, and emotional and sexual needs. Moreover, religious beliefs and attitudes and interaction with in-laws were mentioned by couples as religious and cultural factors affecting the marital intimacy of veteran couples. Demographic factors including education, occupation, economic status, presence of children, duration of marriage, and gender were also considered as factors affecting the marital intimacy of veteran couples.

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