



Comparing Quality of Life and Marital Satisfaction in Mothers of Mentally Retarded and Normal Children in Iran: A systematic review

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Abstract

Introduction: Intellectual disabilities can not only affect children, but they also have impacts on family members. The purpose of this study was to compare the quality of life and marital satisfaction in mothers of mentally retarded and normal children in Iran using a systematic review method.

Objective: The purpose of this review study was to investigate articles on quality of life and marital satisfaction in mothers of children with mental retardation and those of normal children in Iran.

Methodology: To this end; articles indexed in Directory of Open Access Journals Magiran, Google Scholar, PubMed, Library, Information, Irandoc, Scopus, SID and Web of Science were searched.

Results: The range of physical and behavioral problems in children with intellectual disabilities, quality of life, and marital satisfaction were found to affect mentally retarded children and their family members especially mothers. Mental and emotional stress in mothers resulting from presence of such children, allocation of more time to provide care for these children, high financial pressures, limited family and social relationships, maternal



anxiety caused by behavioral problems in such children, maternal sleep disorders, and poor self-efficacy were considered among factors that could directly or indirectly influence quality of life in mothers with mentally retarded children. Slow learning in such children, anxiety about their future, fears concerning probability of birth of another mentally retarded child, unwillingness to have sexual relationships, use of ineffective problem-solving methods by mothers, severity of disabilities, lack of supportive spouse as well as social support, negative parental approaches towards disabilities, along with high parental engagement and their inappropriate problem-solving strategies were also reported as the most significant factors affecting marital satisfaction in mothers of children with intellectual disabilities.

Conclusion: Counseling and training sessions for mothers about parenting styles, stress-coping skills, attitude reform, avoiding extreme support for mothers' problems, individual and parenting counseling on problem-solving issues and strategies to deal with stressful life issues, government funding, as well as support from different organizations were taken into account as the most important and essential ways to improve quality of life and marital satisfaction in mothers with mentally retarded children.

Keywords: Mentally Retarded, Intellectual disabilities, Quality of Life, Marital Satisfaction.

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Introduction

In recent years, the study of children with special needs has drawn the attention of many psychologists. The main focus of research is actually to shed light on differences between these children and normal ones. Among children with special needs, those with intellectual disabilities have been of much more consideration in psychological studies due to their complexities (Hallahan and Kauffman, 2002). Despite widespread advances in technology and medical science, mental retardation is still one of the biggest and the most problematic issues in the domain of children and adolescents (Shariati and Davarmanesh, 2006). It has been argued that mental retardation in terms of general intelligence action, which might be significantly lower than average, can lead to defects in adaptive behavior and also occur during growth (Bode et al, 2014). Disabilities can not only affect children, but they also have an impact on family members (Gardiner and Iarocci, 2012). Various studies have demonstrated that parents of children with mental retardation suffer from mental illnesses, smoking, and alcohol consumption much more than those with normal children (Hindmarsh et al, 2015). In this respect; factors such as huge medical bills, educational costs, fears of having another child with the same disabilities, feelings of guilt, as well as emotional problems can be also added to such difficulties (Morya et al, 2015). In many cultures across the world, women are further assumed responsible for child development; thus, providing primary care for children with intellectual disabilities is often a burden on mothers' shoulders (Ones et al, 2005). The results of numerous studies have indicated that birth of a child with mental retardation is considered as one of the events that can strongly threaten quality of life (Raina et al, 2004) and marital satisfaction in mothers (Aminalsadat and Mohammadi, 2016). The results of clinical trials have similarly suggested that quality of life can be an indicator of quality of healthcare which can also provide much information



about health status (Al Habashneh et al, 2012). Besides, quality of life is being used in various studies and it is widely employed to determine health status in individuals because one of the main goals in all countries is to boost quality of life and well-being in society (Prudente et al, 2010). Quality of life is considered as a mental factor as well as one's perception of the status of the world in relation to goals, standards, and aspirations (Ventegodt et al, 2003). It also includes all aspects of human life (Nesterko et al, 2013).

Many studies have suggested that quality of life in mothers with mentally retarded children is lower than those of normal children (Khayatzadeh, 2009). Another important variable influencing and endangering the birth of intellectually disabled children is marital satisfaction in parents (Winch, 2000). According to Winch, marital satisfaction refers to adaptation with the present and the desirable conditions of marital relationships (Reynolds et al, 2014). When marital satisfaction is met, it is in accordance with what couples expect; nevertheless, marital dissatisfaction arises from mismatch between the present and the preferred status of marital relationships (Musavi Khatat et al, 2011). Children with mental retardation can also cause more conflicts and disagreements between parents, even disrupt marital interactions, and ultimately lead to reduced marital satisfaction (Reynolds et al, 2014). Therefore, need for paying double attention to children with intellectual disabilities can negatively affect quality of life and marital satisfaction in parents, especially mothers. Therefore, the research question addressed is whether there is a difference between quality of life and marital satisfaction in mothers of children with intellectual disabilities and those of normal children in Iran. The purpose of this review study was to compare quality of life and marital satisfaction in mothers of mentally retarded children and normal children.

Results

As illustrated in Table 1, quality of life and marital satisfaction in mothers of children with intellectual disabilities were reported lower than those of normal children in different research studies. Moreover, each of these investigations had found a variety of factors affecting quality of life and marital satisfaction in mothers of children with mental retardation. Moreover, there was a significant difference between the mean scores of quality of life in mothers of normal and mentally retarded children. In addition to mental stress concerning the presence of children with intellectual disabilities, mothers of these children could spend more time with them for the purposes of health and hygiene, care, nutrition, medical training, etc., compared to mothers of normal children (Taghizadeh and Asadi, 2015). In another study, the results of data analysis showed that life satisfaction, quality of life, and subjective well-being in mothers of slow-paced and autistic children was much lower than those of normal children (Hashemzadeh and Amirimajd, 2015).

In a comparative study of mental stress and marital satisfaction in mothers of mentally retarded children, the results suggested that mothers of children with intellectual disabilities could suffer from more stress than those of normal children. They also had lower marital satisfaction than the normal group. So, it was recommended to hold counseling and training sessions for mothers on parenting styles, stress-coping skills, attitude reform, prevention of unwanted pregnancy, and avoiding extreme support in order to reduce maternal problems and improve marital satisfaction (Namjouyanshirazi and Keshavarz, 2014). Assessing quality of life in mothers of special needs children revealed that quality of life in mothers of such children was low due to their children's problems and because the presence of such children in a family could bring about physical and psychological stress as well as limited



family and social relationships, and even severe financial pressures, which could all reduce quality of life in this group of mothers (Yaghmaei and Mohajeri, 2014).

A significant difference was also observed between quality of life in mothers of healthy children and those with cerebral palsy, as well as mothers of healthy children and ones with mentally retarded children in four domains of quality of life. Considering the fact that there was no significant difference between quality of life in mothers of children with different types of intellectual disabilities, these findings showed no relationship between the type of problems in children and quality of life in mothers. Maternal quality of life seemed to depend on the consequences of children's difficulties such as anxiety in mothers due to their children's behavioral problems or maternal sleep disorders caused by children's malaise or seizure which could not be directly correlated with the type of problems in such children. Therefore, it was recommended that supportive organizations and the media provide appropriate information in terms of support, acceptance of disabilities, and recognition of children. Transportation and relocation issues have been also reported as the most important problems for families of such children which require cooperation among different departments and organizations (Khayatzadeh, 2009). Identifying the severity of psychological stress and its correlation with the manner by which marital life could satisfy parents with mentally retarded children could similarly provide necessary information to counselors and psychologists in terms of dealing with these parents and children. Besides, a relationship has been reported between stress and marital satisfaction in parents of children with intellectual disabilities. So, parents of mentally retarded children could experience more stress and higher levels of marital satisfaction than those of normal children. In other words, marital satisfaction could be seen as a function of the existence of mentally retarded children in a family. Due to a range of issues including behavioral and learning disabilities, children with intellectual disabilities could make parents' efforts in terms of new skills training and controlling their inappropriate behaviors futile in achieving the desired outcomes, making it difficult for parents to meet marital satisfaction and even suffer from its reduction. Therefore, parenting counseling and training sessions can lower stress and increase marital satisfaction (Deinitorki et al, 2006).

The presence of exceptional children in families as well as anxiety about their future along with fears concerning possibility of the birth of another mentally retarded child can lessen sexual relationships among couples which can lead to incompatibility in marriage. Comparing problem-solving styles and marital adjustment in mothers of exceptional and normal children, the results of a study also indicated that marital adjustment and its dimensions such as consensus, cohesion, and expressing affection in mothers of exceptional children were significantly lower than those of normal children and they had used more inefficient problem-solving styles. Therefore, use of ineffective problem-solving styles in a family could provide a basis for differences between members and, accordingly, marital adjustment could decrease (Karegar and Asghari, 2015). Furthermore, the study of psychological factors and marital satisfaction in mothers of mentally retarded and physically disabled children revealed that mothers of children with intellectual disabilities had less marital satisfaction and more psychological problems than those of children with physical disabilities. Additionally, the type and the severity of disabilities, supportive spouse, social support, and parental attitudes towards disabilities could affect psychological and marital satisfaction in mothers (Khodabandeh et al, 2016). The results of another investigation similarly showed a significant difference between mental health, marital satisfaction, and self-expression in parents of students with mental retardation. The study also found that inability



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of mentally retarded children to do their work as well as their constant need for care by others, a lot of parents and the current lives of most families living natively, may be due to low satisfaction of the lives of parents of children behind mental balance compared to normal children's parents (Motamedin et al, 2008). Concerning quality of life and self-efficacy among mothers of mentally retarded children, the results of a research suggested a significant relationship between quality of life and self-efficacy in mothers of children with intellectual disabilities. In this respect, quality of life in mothers with retarded children was low despite the fact that there was a significant relationship between self-efficacy and most of quality of life domains, so it was possible to improve self-efficacy and quality of life in such mothers through holding training courses and workshops (Ahani et al, 2011).

Comparing stress, marital adjustment, and coping strategies among parents of mentally retarded children, the results of a study showed that parents of children with intellectual disabilities had higher levels of psychological stress and marital satisfaction than those of normal children. It should be noted that mothers of mentally retarded children could use fewer appropriate problem-solving methods than those with normal children (Arjmandnia et al, 2013). Besides, another research demonstrated that parents of children with intellectual disabilities were in poor conditions in terms of marital satisfaction. Therefore, parental training was assumed essential in terms of coping with mental and marital problems and disorders by various organizations such as Social Welfare Organization, Special Education Organization, as well as the media (Jenaabadi and Nastizaei, 2010).

Comparing quality of life and family functioning in mothers with slow-paced and normal children, the findings of a study indicated a significant difference between quality of life and family functioning in such mothers. Therefore; given the role of women in improving health status of children and their families, their ability to provide professional services could reduce vulnerabilities. They could also play the roles of a spouse and a mother in family, and ultimately affect health status in their communities. Accordingly; parenting counseling and training, conflict resolution skills, stress management skills, behavior modification, attitude reform, self-sufficiency, and anxiety avoidance sessions were required to be taken as major steps towards reducing maternal and family satisfaction (Hosseinkhanzadeh et al, 2013). Comparing marital satisfaction in families with retarded, deaf, and normal children in a research study also showed a significant difference in levels of marital satisfaction among families with mentally retarded, deaf, and normal children. Conflicts between parents in terms of education for these children as well as loss of libido were among other factors affecting reduced marital satisfaction following the presence of children with intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, fathers in such families were likely to leave mothers of these children because of lack of preparation to take on additional responsibilities (Hosseinkhanzadeh et al, 2013).

Table 1: List of studies conducted in Iran

Title	Number of participants	Research methodology	Main results	Reference
Quality of life in mothers of mentally retarded and normal children	50 mothers of mentally retarded children and 50 mothers of normal children	causal-comparative	The results of the study showed a significant difference between the mean scores of quality of life in mothers of normal children and mothers of mentally retarded ones.	(Taghizadeh and Asadi, 2015).



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Quality of life, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being in mothers of slow-paced, autistic, and normal children	50 autistic mothers, 50 mothers with slow-paced children, and 50 mothers with normal children	causal-comparative	The results of data analysis revealed that life satisfaction, quality of life, and subjective well-being in mothers of slow-paced and autistic children were much lower than those with normal children.	(Hashemzadeh and Amirimajd, 2015).
Mental stress and marital satisfaction in mothers of mentally retarded and normal children	60 mothers of mentally retarded children and 60 mothers of normal children	causal-comparative	The results revealed that mothers of mentally retarded children could tolerate more stress than those of normal children. Mothers of children with intellectual disabilities also had lower marital satisfaction than the ones with normal children.	(Namjouyanshirazi and Keshavarz, 2014).
Quality of life in mothers of children with special needs	13 mothers of children with special needs	semi-structured interviewing	Quality of life in mothers of children with special needs was low due to their children's problems.	mothers (Yaghmaei and Mohajeri, 2014).
Comparing quality of life in mothers of children with cerebral palsy, mentally retarded children, and normal ones	100 mothers of children with cerebral palsy, 100 mothers of children with mental retardation, and 100 mothers of normal children	analytic cross-sectional	The results of this study highlighted a significant difference between mothers of healthy children and those with cerebral palsy, as well as mothers of healthy children and those with mental retardation in four domains of quality of life.	(Khayatzadeh, 2009).
Stress and marital satisfaction in parents of mentally retarded children	40 parents of mentally retarded children and 40 parents of normal children	comparative cross-sectional	The results of this study demonstrated a relationship between stress and marital satisfaction in parents of mentally retarded children. Parents of children with intellectual disabilities also experienced more stress and marital satisfaction than those with normal children.	(Deinitorki et al, 2006).
Comparison of problem-solving styles and marital adjustment in mothers of exceptional and normal children	63 mothers of exceptional children and 67 mothers of normal children	causal-comparative	The results of this study indicated that marital adjustment in mothers of exceptional children was significantly lower than that in mothers of normal children. Also, mothers of exceptional children could use more	(Karegar and Asghari, 2015)



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			inefficient problem-solving styles.	
Psychological factors and marital satisfaction in mothers of mentally retarded and physically disabled children	30 mothers of retarded children and 30 mothers of children with physical disabilities	causal-comparative	The results revealed that mothers of children with mental retardation had less marital satisfaction and psychological problems than mothers of children with physical disabilities.	(Khodabandeh et al, 2016).
Comparison of mental health, marital satisfaction, and self-expression in parents of students with intellectual disabilities and normal ones	208 parents of normal children and 206 parents of children with intellectual disabilities	causal-comparative	The results of data analysis showed a significant difference between mental health, marital satisfaction, and self-expression in parents of students with intellectual disabilities.	(Motamedin et al, 2008).
Relationship between quality of life and self-efficacy among mothers of mentally retarded children	121 mothers of mentally retarded children	cross-sectional	The results of the research suggested a significant relationship between self-efficacy and quality of life in mothers of mentally retarded children. Quality of life in mothers of children with intellectual disabilities was also reported at low levels.	(Ahani et al, 2001).
Comparison of mental stress, marital adjustment, and coping strategies among parents of mentally retarded and normal children	50 parents of children with intellectual disabilities and 50 parents of normal children	causal-comparative	The results of the study indicated that parents of children with mental retardation had higher levels of psychological stress and marital satisfaction than those of normal children.	(Arjmandnia al, 2013).
Marital satisfaction in parents of mentally retarded children	100 parents of children with mental retardation	cross-sectional	Parents of children with mental retardation were in poor conditions in terms of marital satisfaction.	(Jenaabadi and Nastizaei, 2010).



Comparison of quality of life and family functioning in mothers of slow-paced and normal children	100 mothers with slow-paced children and 100 mothers with normal children	causal-comparative	The findings of the study showed a significant difference between quality of life and family functioning in mothers of slow-paced and normal children.	(Hosseinkhanzadeh et al, 2013).
Comparison of marital satisfaction in families of mentally retarded, deaf, and normal children	106 mothers of mentally retarded, deaf, and normal children	causal-comparative	The results revealed a significant difference in the levels of marital satisfaction among families with mentally retarded, deaf, and normal children.	(Hosseinkhanzadeh et al, 2013).

Discussion

Among the most vulnerable families in Iranian society is those having children with intellectual disabilities. In such families; parents, especially mothers, as the main caregivers of children, are usually faced with far more complex problems than those with normal children. Therefore, recognition of mental status, quality of life, and marital satisfaction in mothers of mentally retarded children is of utmost importance because mothers play an important role in child emotional and social development and providing counseling and interventional programs to correct these conditions is necessary.

A review of various research studies showed that the levels of quality of life and marital satisfaction between mothers of mentally retarded children was significantly lower than those in mothers with normal children (Rautmann et al, 2023). In several studies, the effect of various factors such as mental stress in children with intellectual disabilities, allocation of more time to such children for purposes of health and hygiene, care, nutrition, high financial pressures, physical and emotional stress in mothers due to presence of such children, limited family and social relationships, maternal anxiety caused by behavioral problems in these children, or maternal sleep disorders following child malaise or seizure, as well as poor self-efficacy and their effects on quality of life in mothers of children with mental retardation was also investigated. In addition to the factors affecting marital satisfaction in mothers with mentally retarded children, other factors such as slow-learning in children despite efforts made by parents in training new skills, concerns about children's future, and fears concerning probability of birth of another mentally retarded child, reluctance to establish sexual relationships, use of ineffective problem-solving methods by mothers, type and severity of disabilities, supportive spouse, social support, parental attitudes towards disabilities, high parental engagement, inappropriate problem-solving strategies, differences between parents in terms of education for disabled children, and leaving mothers of these children by their husbands because of lack of preparation of fathers to assume more responsibilities have been also highlighted. Of course, in some studies, marital satisfaction and quality of life in mothers with mentally retarded children have not been directly dependent on the type and the severity of children's disabilities rather they have been more relevant to the factors mentioned. Given the low level of quality of life and marital satisfaction in mothers of mentally retarded children compared to those of normal children, studies have also provided various suggestions for



rehabilitation and assistance to such parents, especially mothers, which in turn can be in the direction of improving quality of life and marital satisfaction including advisory, informational, advocacy, financial, and corrective counseling sessions on parenting styles, stress-coping skills, attitude reform, and avoidance.

Extreme support for mothers' problems, counseling and training sessions for these mothers to improve their quality of life, offering special education programs for families, and providing individual and group counseling for parents on problem-solving skills and coping strategies for stressful life as well as donations on behalf of the government have been also suggested. Training parents to cope with mental disorders and marital problems by organizations such as Social Welfare Organization, Special Education Organization, as well as the media, emotional support, teaching conflict resolution skills, behavior modification, self-sufficiency, and anxiety prevention have been further recommended in this respect (Singh and Lohumi, 2023). Finally, the issue of transportation and relocation was reported as one of the most important problems in these families.

Conclusion

The range of physical and behavioral problems in mentally retarded children as well as marital satisfaction and quality of life in their mothers can be influenced by many factors. While mothers of normal children do not experience many of these issues, those of children with mental retardation take less time to deal with things like social activities, sports, work, traveling with relatives, as well as close and intimate relationships with others. Due to the special conditions of children with intellectual disabilities, their parents' sexual relationships can become limited, their stress is increased, and ultimately marital intimacy is diminished. Thus, this group of parents are in need of help in terms of coping with family problems, accepting children's mental retardation and other related problems; so paying attention to mental and marital status of mothers as ones playing an important role in emotional and social development of children and those who are at the core of the problem is undeniable.

Accordingly, it is necessary to understand the problems of mothers with mentally retarded children because provision of various interventions and services they require depends on their main problems. In this regard, mental and emotional stress in mothers resulting from presence of such children, allocation of more time to these children, high financial pressures, limited family and social relationships, maternal anxiety caused by behavioral problems in children, maternal sleep disorders, and poor self-efficacy are taken into account as factors that can directly or indirectly affect quality of life in mothers with mentally retarded children. Factors affecting marital satisfaction in mothers include slow learning in children, anxiety about their future, and fears concerning probability of birth of another child with intellectual disabilities, unwillingness to have sexual relationships, use of ineffective problem-solving methods by mothers, severity of disabilities, supportive spouse, social support, and parental attitudes towards disabilities, high parental engagement, as well as inappropriate problem-solving methods. Considering numerous problems in parents of mentally retarded children, especially mothers, and needs to pay much attention to their physical and mental well-being, helping these parents can be assumed as an important step towards boosting mental health and life expectancy. Ultimately, counseling and training sessions for mothers about parenting styles, stress-coping skills, attitude reform, avoiding extreme support for mothers' problems, individual and



parenting counseling on problem-solving issues as well as strategies to deal with stressful life issues and government funding, support by various organizations, can be all considered as the most important and essential ways to improve quality of and marital satisfaction in mothers of mentally retarded children. The results of this study could be used to help parents of children with intellectual disabilities.

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