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Exploring the Lived Experiences of Couples in Unsuccessful Marriages: A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The present study explores the lived experiences of couples in unsuccessful marriages using a qualitative approach and a phenomenological method.

Methods and Materials: The research participants consisted of all couples who visited counseling centers in Isfahan in 2022 due to marital conflicts and divorce. From this group, 12 individuals were purposefully selected as the sample. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, and the data analysis followed the Colaizzi method. To ensure the reliability of the findings, Lincoln and Guba's four criteria—using established reliability criteria—were employed.

Findings: The data analysis resulted in 33 initial codes for premarriage factors and 28 initial codes for postmarriage factors. The pre-marriage themes included self-awareness (lack of self-awareness), differentiation (lack of differentiation), cognition, lack of insight, emotional and affective dimension, sense of worthiness, and physical attractiveness. The post-marriage themes comprised personality type, economic security, intimacy, physical attractiveness, clear boundaries, and mental and cognitive maturity.

Conclusion: According to the findings, the results could inform pre-marriage counseling or interventions to support marital stability would add relevance for readers.

Keywords: premarriage and postmarriage factors, lived experiences, unsuccessful marriages.

Introduction

Marriage is often regarded as a cornerstone of personal fulfillment and societal stability. However, rising rates of marital dissatisfaction and divorce have underscored the urgent need to understand the factors contributing to unsuccessful marriages. This study aims to shed light on these dynamics, offering insights that could inform marriage counseling practices and enhance mental health outcomes for affected individuals (Cherlin, 2010).

The initial stage in the family life cycle, choosing a life partner, is widely regarded as the most important. The theory of homogamy suggests that individuals are typically attracted to those who are similar in age, religion, nationality, and education (Yoo & Joo, 2022). Significant changes and responsibilities arise during marriage, similar to those experienced in adolescence, when gender roles shift. Girls face new expectations as they transition into adulthood, and their domestic roles and responsibilities increase. Marriage marks a transition into adulthood, with increased responsibilities toward one's spouse and family (Ali, 2024).

Since the formation of societies, individuals have formed bonds in various ways, with marriage being the most significant and common. Marriage, as a social custom, establishes conventional, religious, and legal bonds between individuals, fulfilling their physical, emotional, and security needs. It also provides a foundation for the formation and continuity of the family, the first and most influential social institution. The success of a marriage and the health of the family are only possible when the quality of the relationship between the couple is good, and conflicts are avoided. Various factors, such as personality traits, mental disorders, age, gender, and cultural and attitudinal similarities, influence the success and longevity of marital relationships (Aydogan et al., 2021).

Erikson's psychosocial theory focuses on the influence of psychological and social factors on human behavior, highlighting their impact on physical and emotional well-being and individuals' ability to connect with society. Evidence shows that factors like pre-marriage knowledge, love and communication skills, problem-solving abilities, family management, positive moral and behavioral traits, personality stability, intellectual and social maturity, personal beliefs, and

spiritual strength play a crucial role in marital success (Bahador Motlagh et al., 2024). Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development emphasizes the importance of balancing intimacy and isolation in early adulthood for marital success (Berk, 2018). Homogamy, the tendency to marry individuals with similar traits, is linked to marital stability, as couples with similar values, educational backgrounds, and religious beliefs are less likely to experience conflict (Watson et al., 2004).

Thus, by understanding the criteria and indicators of marital success, couples can strengthen their bond in meaningful ways. However, in reality, many marriages face significant challenges in maintaining harmony and happiness. Issues like conflict, divorce, and imbalance in relationships are often problems that trouble many couples (Mahmudulhassan & Abuzar, 2024). The rise in divorce not only affects the involved couples but also impacts other family members and the broader community.

Satisfaction with marital life and a successful marriage is the most important lived experience that plays a significant role in the continuity of a relationship. The phenomenological approach in marriage studies is valuable for understanding subjective experiences and their meanings. It captures nuanced dynamics, emotional connections, and personal growth, providing a rich understanding of marital success or failure. This approach is especially useful when exploring sensitive topics like marriage challenges, where participants' voices are central (Daly, 2007).

The study identifies factors influencing marital success before marriage, including age at marriage, personality traits, cultural and social backgrounds, and post-marriage factors. Age at marriage leads to more stable marriages, personality traits like emotional stability and agreeableness lead to higher satisfaction, and shared backgrounds foster understanding and reduce conflicts (Amato et al., 2007). Post-marital factors include communication skills, financial stability, and adaptability to life changes. This holistic approach highlights the importance of considering all aspects of marriage (Watson et al., 2004).

Understanding the factors that lead couples to feel dissatisfied with their marital life and consider their marriage unsuccessful is the issue this study aims to investigate. This research seeks to examine the lived experiences of couples in identifying the criteria for an

unsuccessful marriage through a qualitative, phenomenological approach. This study aims to identify key pre- and post-marriage factors influencing unsuccessful marriages through the lived experiences of couples.

Methods and Materials

Study Design and Participants

This study adopts a phenomenological approach to delve deeply into the lived experiences of individuals in unsuccessful marriages. Phenomenology is particularly suited for this research as it prioritizes understanding the subjective meanings and emotions participants attach to their post-marriage experiences, providing insights that quantitative methods may overlook. By focusing on personal narratives, this approach captures the complexities and nuances of marital challenges, contributing to a richer understanding of the factors underlying marital dissatisfaction and failure.

The study participants included all couples who visited counseling centers in the city of Isfahan in 2022 due to marital conflicts and divorce. A purposive sampling method was used to select participants. Initial interviews were conducted with 20 couples experiencing conflict and seeking divorce, and after conducting in-depth interviews with 12 couples, data saturation was achieved, leading to the conclusion of data collection.

Instruments

The data collection for this study involved semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' unique experiences while maintaining a focus on key themes. The interview guide was developed based on the literature on marital dynamics, drawing from both theoretical frameworks and prior qualitative research on marriage dissatisfaction. Key themes included communication issues, emotional disconnect, financial stress, and conflict resolution strategies. Sample questions included:

• "Can you describe a specific moment when you realized your marriage was struggling?"

• "How would you describe the emotional changes you experienced during your marriage?"

• "What factors do you believe contributed to the failure of your marriage?"

The interviews were conducted in two sessions, with each lasting approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

The interviewers focused on the interview process, and with the participants' consent, the interviews were recorded. To ensure the validity of the research, member checking (feedback from participants) and triangulation (using feedback from both participants and non-participant experts) were employed. The reliability of the method was reported at 0.85. The study utilized purposive sampling, selecting 12 participants from counseling centers based on their direct experiences with unsuccessful marriages. The sample size was determined following qualitative research guidelines, which suggest that phenomenological studies typically require 5 to 15 participants to reach data saturation (Creswell, 2021). This range allows for a thorough exploration of shared experiences while avoiding redundancy. Previous phenomenological studies on marriage and relationship dynamics have similarly demonstrated that a sample size within this range is adequate for capturing the depth and complexity of participants' lived experiences. Data saturation was monitored throughout the study to ensure that no new themes emerged, confirming the sufficiency of the sample size.

Data Analysis

For the analysis and interpretation of the interviews, Colaizzi's method was used. According to this method, the interviews were first listened to, and transcripts were created. Each interview was read several times to allow the researcher to grasp a comprehensive understanding of the descriptions. Repetitive, irrelevant, and unnecessary material was removed, and key statements directly related to the research were extracted. These statements were then assigned descriptive labels that accurately conveyed the content. This process was followed for all interviews until the last sentence was processed (Creswell, 2021). The study involved a systematic approach to analyze the experiences of participants in unsuccessful marriages. The first step involved thoroughly reading and rereading interview transcripts to understand each participant's experiences. Significant statements related to the participants' experiences were extracted, analyzed, and

translated into meanings. These meanings were then grouped into themes, representing commonalities across participants. To ensure the reliability of the themes, a cross-checking process was conducted, including peer review and member checking. The themes were then validated and integrated into a coherent narrative, capturing the essence of the phenomenon under study. This method ensured a rigorous and transparent analysis of the data, and enhanced the credibility and reliability of the thematic analysis.

Findings and Results

In the first stage of exploring the criteria for an unsuccessful marriage, 33 pre-marriage codes and 28 post-marriage initial codes were extracted from the interviews. In the second stage of analysis, through summarizing the themes, 17 central themes for pre-marriage and 11 for post-marriage were identified. These were further categorized into seven main themes for pre-marriage and six for post-marriage. The stages of qualitative data analysis are displayed in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

Qualitative Coding of Interview on Criteria for Unsuccessful Marriages (Pre-Marriage)

Final Code	Secondary Code	Initial Code	Statement
Self-awareness (Lack of self-awareness)	Uninformed choice	Lack of informed choice	My wrong choice led to dissatisfaction with my life.
	Poor choice	I only saw his good side and ignored everything else.	
	Irrational belief	I thought marrying him would make me 100% happy.	
Lack of insight into marriage	No thoughts of marriage	I had no intention of marrying.	
	No standards	I had no particular criteria for marriage, I just married out of attachment.	
	No criteria	I had no criteria at all.	
	Curiosity about marriage	I got into marriage out of curiosity.	
Differentiation (Lack of differentiation)	Lack of independence	Fear of judgment from others led me to marry because of family pressure due to my age.	
	Family insistence	My family insisted on this marriage.	
Lack of good decision-making	Peer comparison	All my friends were married, and I was the only single one.	
	Importance of others' opinions	People around me said I would miss a good opportunity.	
Complementarity	Patience with partner's lack of wisdom	Since I have a low tolerance, I wanted my partner to be patient.	
Cognition	Lack of consultation	My family had no role in my choice.	
	No time for knowing partner	I didn't spend enough time getting to know him because he was familiar.	
	Ignoring warning signs	I only saw his good side and ignored his wrong behavior.	
Savior complex	Willingness to sacrifice	During the engagement, I heard about his family problems and wanted to fix them.	
	Compassion	I was affected by his crying.	
Lack of insight	Ignoring family's role	We had significant cultural differences.	
	Family's irrelevance	His family didn't matter to me.	
Ignoring physical criteria	Ignoring age difference	He was three years younger than me.	
	Ignoring age criteria	He was four years younger than me.	
Emotional and affective dimension	Excessive attention to feelings	I was attracted to the new and special feelings he awakened in me.	
	Importance of passion and love	Our pre-marriage relationship and being in love mattered a lot to me.	
	Emotional words	I liked his emotional way of talking.	
Excitement	Special excitement in the relationship	He gave me a special kind of excitement.	

Sense of worthiness	Feeling loved	I felt satisfied with the attention he gave me.
	Feeling important	I found his persistence in wanting to marry me attractive.
	Feeling valued	I liked his possessiveness over my relationships; it made me feel loved and important.
Need for affection	Affection	I was happy with how affectionate he was toward me.
Physical attractiveness	Importance of appearance	He seemed to have good social behavior and speech.
	Appearance	Appearance and style were very important to me.
	Physical beauty	His appearance and beauty were very important to me.

Table 2

Qualitative Coding of Interview on Criteria for Unsuccessful Marriages (Post-Marriage)

Final Code	Secondary Code	Initial Code	Statement
Personality type	Personal traits	Kindness	He was kind.
	Patience	He was patient.	
	Behavior	His behavior and how we interacted were important.	
	Honesty	He was honest.	
Economic security	Financial aspect	Income	What is his financial status (income)?
	Job importance	He had a suitable job.	
	Relative comfort	He had a house and a car, which was essential for me.	
Intimacy	Intellectual intimacy	Shared worldview	We had a shared worldview.
	Same way of thinking	His perspective on marital relationships aligned with mine.	
	View of women	His view on women's freedom and progress mattered.	
	Shared views on life	We shared the same views on various life matters.	
Aesthetic intimacy	Shared view of beauty	We agreed on what is beautiful.	
Recreational intimacy	Shared recreational interests	We chose the same recreational activities.	
	Shared interests	We had common interests.	
Emotional intimacy	Showing the true self	I could be my true self in front of him.	
	Comfort in expressing emotions	I felt comfortable expressing my needs and feelings to him.	
	Ease in showing emotions	I could easily talk about my discomforts.	
Physical attractiveness	Importance of appearance	Appearance and how he dressed mattered to me.	
	Personal hygiene	He had to smell good and be clean.	
	Physical appearance	His appearance, including his face, height, and build, was important to me.	
Boundaries	Balanced relationships with others	He didn't spend too much time with his friends.	
	Not overly involved with friends	He wasn't too involved with friends.	
Law-abiding	Rule-abiding	He respected rules and regulations.	
	Respect for rules	He led a lawful life.	
Cognitive and emotional maturity	Rational behavior	Both partners had reached full maturity before marriage.	
	Partner's maturity	My partner was a mature person.	
	Rational awareness	I was more aware of my own behaviors.	
	Reasonable behavior	My behaviors and expectations were reasonable.	

Pre-marriage factors such as lack of self-awareness, poor decision-making, and emotional impulsiveness often set the stage for dissatisfaction later in the marriage. These factors underscore the importance of making informed, thoughtful choices before entering a relationship (Table 1).

Post-marriage factors, especially personality traits, intimacy (both emotional and physical), and maturity, play a significant role in sustaining a marriage.

Relationships that lacked alignment in these areas were more likely to experience dissatisfaction and eventual breakdown (Table 2).

These findings outline both pre-marriage and post-marriage factors that contribute to unsuccessful marriages.

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study explored the lived experiences of couples regarding the criteria for unsuccessful marriages, using a qualitative, phenomenological approach. The findings identified both pre-marriage and post-marriage factors that significantly contribute to marital success or failure. Specifically, the study revealed seven pre-marriage themes and six post-marriage themes, each with subcategories that reflect the multifaceted nature of marriage and its challenges.

Pre-Marriage Factors:

Self-awareness: Participants emphasized the importance of understanding oneself before marrying. This theme highlighted how a lack of self-awareness can lead to poor decisions and unmet expectations, which are linked to marital dissatisfaction. Without a clear sense of personal identity and goals, individuals may struggle to make informed decisions, resulting in a mismatch with their partner's needs and values.

Differentiation: The ability to balance emotional engagement with rational thinking was deemed crucial. Couples who struggled with differentiation, often driven by emotional dependency or external pressures, were more likely to experience difficulties in decision-making. This finding echoes research by Abd Yusefkhani et al. (2023), which suggests that emotional and cognitive maturity are vital for successful marital choices (Abd Yousef khani et al., 2023).

Understanding: Participants indicated that lacking a deep understanding of both themselves and their partners can lead to serious conflicts. This theme emphasizes the necessity of setting clear goals and expectations in marriage. Khoddadi Sangdeh (2023) also found that mutual understanding is essential to avoid emotional disconnection.

Insight: Ignoring the influence of family dynamics and physical criteria, such as age and background, was highlighted as a common error. Participants noted that dismissing these factors often led to emotional distance

and, in some cases, emotional divorce. Alshahrani and Hammad (2023) similarly stress the importance of considering family roles and physical compatibility in marital decision-making.

Emotional and Affective Dimension: The ability to manage emotions effectively within a relationship was seen as key to avoiding conflicts. Couples who possessed emotional intelligence were better able to navigate disagreements and maintain a healthy relationship. This supports Navabi Nejad et al.'s (2023) findings that emotional regulation is a key determinant of marital satisfaction (Navabinejad et al., 2023).

Sense of Worth: Feeling valued and loved by one's partner was identified as a significant factor in marital success. Participants who experienced a high sense of worth and affection in their marriage were generally more satisfied with their relationship. This aligns with research suggesting that emotional support and validation contribute to greater life satisfaction within marriage (Navabinejad et al., 2023).

Physical Attraction: Physical attractiveness played an important role, especially during the initial stages of marriage. Participants reported that when physical attraction diminished or was not reciprocated, emotional issues and dissatisfaction arose. Liu et al. (2024) found that physical attraction, though initially significant, may lose importance over time, but it can still impact sexual satisfaction and emotional closeness (Liu et al., 2024).

Post-Marriage Factors:

Personality Type: The compatibility of personality traits was seen as a key predictor of marital stability. Participants who described significant personality mismatches with their partner indicated that these differences contributed to feelings of frustration and eventual breakdown. Khosravi and Sepah Mansour (2024) emphasize that personality differences can be a major cause of marital conflict, particularly when partners' traits clash (Khosravi & Sepahmansour, 2024).

Economic Security: Financial stability was identified as a major factor in marital satisfaction. Participants who experienced economic difficulties or lacked financial security reported increased stress and dissatisfaction. This finding resonates with existing literature, including Harsono et al. (2024), which highlights the importance of financial stability in fostering relationship security (Harsono et al., 2024).

Intimacy: Intimacy across various dimensions—emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, and recreational—was identified as a fundamental aspect of marital satisfaction. Participants noted that strong emotional and intellectual connections were critical in maintaining trust and love. This aligns with Taghipour and Panah Ali (2023), who found that intimacy plays a central role in sustaining healthy relationships (Taghipour & Panah Ali, 2023).

Physical Attractiveness: Similar to the pre-marriage stage, physical appearance continued to influence marital satisfaction in the post-marriage phase. Couples who were dissatisfied with their partner's appearance, or whose physical attraction waned, reported issues in both sexual and emotional intimacy. This finding is consistent with Ashkenazi et al. (2024), who suggest that physical dissatisfaction can lead to challenges in maintaining sexual intimacy (Ashkenazi et al., 2024).

Clear Boundaries: The importance of establishing and respecting personal boundaries within a marriage was emphasized by participants. Those who allowed external relationships or overly involved friends and family members to affect their marriage reported instability. Blakeman et al. (2024) also highlight the role of healthy boundaries in sustaining marital closeness and respect (Blakeman et al., 2024).

Maturity and Cognitive Understanding: Participants who had reached emotional and intellectual maturity reported greater satisfaction in their marriages. These individuals were better able to manage conflicts, set realistic expectations, and tolerate differences. Gholami Gharehshiran et al. (2022) argue that intellectual maturity enables partners to approach marriage with more realistic perspectives and greater resilience to stressors (Gholami Gherashiran et al., 2022).

The findings of this study underscore the importance of both pre-marriage and post-marriage criteria in determining the success or failure of a marriage. The pre-marriage factors, including self-awareness, differentiation, and understanding, set the stage for informed decision-making and mutual compatibility. At the same time, post-marriage factors such as personality compatibility, economic security, intimacy, and intellectual maturity play a critical role in maintaining a healthy and stable relationship.

This study reinforces the need for couples to prioritize self-awareness and mutual understanding before marriage and emphasizes the continued importance of emotional, intellectual, and physical intimacy after marriage. By educating individuals about these key factors, both before and during marriage, the likelihood of marital success can be significantly increased. Future research should explore the role of culture and societal norms in shaping these factors and further investigate how interventions focusing on these themes can improve marital outcomes.

By linking the findings to existing literature, such as the works of Abd Yusefkhani et al. (2023), Khosravi & Sepah Mansour (2024), and Taghipour & Panah Ali (2023), the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics influencing marriage and offers a foundation for future research in marriage counseling and therapy (Abd Yousef khani et al., 2023; Khosravi & Sepahmansour, 2024; Taghipour & Panah Ali, 2023).

The results of this study show that pre- and post-marriage criteria play an important role in the success or failure of a marriage. The pre-marriage criteria include self-awareness, differentiation, understanding, insight, emotional and affective dimensions, a sense of worth, and physical attractiveness. These factors help couples make more informed decisions and achieve a stable marriage through better understanding of themselves and their partner. Research indicates that self-awareness and mutual understanding are among the most influential factors in marital success (Abd Yousef khani et al., 2023; Khodadadi Sangdeh, 2023). Moreover, proper emotion regulation and a sense of worth contribute to increased marital satisfaction (Navabinejad et al., 2023).

On the other hand, post-marriage criteria also play a critical role in the durability and stability of relationships. Personality traits of the spouses and economic stability are among the most important factors influencing the continuation of a shared life. Personality traits can either strengthen or weaken the relationship between spouses, with those possessing incompatible traits being at higher risk of divorce (Khosravi & Sepahmansour, 2024). Additionally, economic security and financial independence are significant factors contributing to marital stability and satisfaction (Harsono et al., 2024). Furthermore, intimacy in emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic dimensions is a key foundation of married life, fostering love and trust between spouses (Taghipour & Panah Ali, 2023).

Maintaining appropriate boundaries in relationships and respecting each spouse's individuality are also crucial factors that can prevent problems in married life (Blakeman et al., 2024). Lastly, intellectual and cognitive maturity in spouses allows them to approach issues with greater realism and manage conflicts more effectively (Gholami Gherashiran et al., 2022).

Overall, this study highlights that the success of a marriage depends not only on pre-marriage factors like self-awareness and proper understanding of the partner but also on post-marriage criteria such as intimacy, economic stability, and intellectual maturity. Therefore, emphasizing the education and awareness of couples in both stages, pre- and post-marriage, can help prevent problems and increase satisfaction in married life.

The study on unsuccessful marriages has several limitations, including the subjective nature of qualitative research, a small sample size of 12 participants, and a limited demographic scope. The subjective nature of qualitative research may affect the generalizability and objectivity of the conclusions. The sample size is small and geographically specific, limiting the diversity of the sample. Additionally, the study may have social desirability bias, where participants may provide answers that are perceived as socially acceptable or positive, potentially underreporting issues like infidelity or emotional abuse. Therefore, future research should address these limitations by including larger, more diverse samples and exploring alternative data collection methods.

The study highlights the importance of self-awareness, differentiation, independence, understanding, mutual expectations, and family dynamics in determining the success of marriages. It suggests that pre-marital counseling should focus on self-reflection exercises, teaching couples to balance personal goals with marital expectations, and ensuring a shared understanding of roles, expectations, and life goals. It also suggests that family dynamics and cultural backgrounds should be examined to help individuals make informed decisions.

This study explores the criteria for unsuccessful marriages and offers insights for practitioners and policymakers. Future research could include longitudinal studies that track couples over time to understand how pre-marriage factors evolve and influence post-marriage experiences. Cross-cultural and socioeconomic contexts could be explored to assess the role of societal influences on marital satisfaction. Quantitative validation of phenomenological themes could strengthen the generalizability of the findings. Additional variables such as communication patterns, conflict resolution strategies, and external support systems could be explored to provide a more holistic view of what contributes to marital success or failure. Intervention-based studies could investigate the effectiveness of targeted interventions for couples, such as pre-marital counseling or post-marital therapy. These avenues could provide actionable recommendations for couples and practitioners, providing deeper insights into the complex dynamics of marriage.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The entire intervention program applied in this study received approval from the Ethics Committee of Universitas Negeri Malang No:04.07.4/UN32.14.2.8/LT/2024. This study also adhered to the principles of the World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki regarding ethical conduct in research involving human subjects.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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