

# What Keeps Dissatisfied People in Marriage?

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## Abstract

Marital satisfaction and stability in course of couple relationship has been the topic of interest in many studies. Some of couples are dissatisfied with their marriage and they end in divorce. Dissatisfying marriages are not always ended. In order to find better understanding on the reasons behind the formation, continuous and end of relationship, social exchange theory is usually utilized. The purpose of this study was to find out the factors that caused dissatisfied married individuals to hold their relationship together. This study was a qualitative study that used semi-structured deep interview. 12 married individuals were selected by purposeful sampling. Data analysis addressed the content of marriage functions among Iranian married individual with low marital satisfaction. 6 main themes and 20 subthemes were emerged from the data. These main themes revealed marriage functions of psychological, child- related, value- related, sex, social, and economic which made participants hold their marriage together. It was explained in the discussion part of the study that how some of basic components of social exchange theory differ between our participants in the current study.

**Keywords:** dissatisfied married individuals, marital satisfaction, marriage Functions, social exchange theory, qualitative research

## 1. Introduction

Marriage is a fundamental and essential foundation across the most of cultures and societies around the world (Bowman & Dollahite, 2013). Married individuals typically are healthier physically and emotionally than the unmarried and are a lower risk of mortality for them (Iveniuk, Waite, Laumann, Mc Clintock, & Tiedt, 2014). Nock (2007) showed that both individuals and society benefit from Marriage. He discusses that the promotion of marriage should be a priority for government since it improves health and protection for families, and contributes to couples maintain normal and organized lives. These and many other reasons, entitle marriage to be the center of attention of a great deal of studies yet continues to need further surveys (Bowman & Dollahite, 2013).

Diverse studies demonstrate that divorce rate is increasing around the world, while based on Bower, separations are caused by variety of factors (Shakerian et al., 2014). Iran is also experiencing similar problem, which is an unexpected increase in the rate of divorce. According to Foroutan & Jadid Milani (2008), it has the world's fourth divorce rank.

Why do married couples get divorce? And why some couples stay married? These are two questions that are emerged. Based on the belief of many people, this decision is typically affected by the process of relationship deterioration. In relation to this program, couples often contradict and struggle, they become separated emotionally and the marital happiness of each spouse reduces. Finally, they are convinced that their marriage cannot be continued and one or both of them decide to put an end to their marriage. On the other hand, the marriage function of some other couples is perfect and they are completely satisfied with their marriage. Despite the story of some satisfying marriage that are saved together and some marriages that ended in divorce, these two stories are not the only patterns (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). There is another category in which married couples do not have satisfying marriage or a perfect one but they stay together.

In order to find better understanding on the reasons behind the formation, continuous and end of relationship, social exchange theory is usually utilized (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007). Three basic elements including attractions, barriers and alternatives form this theory. Different kinds of these constituents are a sign of some satisfying marriage end, for example when the attractive is less than the alternatives (Siennick, Stewart, and Staff, 2014). Dissatisfying marriages are not always ended, for example when there are many barriers to leave.

However, there are few studies on factors that keep dissatisfied couples in their marriage. This study, therefore discusses the marriage functions among dissatisfied Iranian individual married to investigate what keeps dissatisfied spouses in marriage.

Marital satisfaction and stability in course of couple relationship has been the topic of interest in many studies (Schoebi, Karney, & Bradbury, 2012).

However, there are still uncertainty features and a number of questions on the topic. Different theories including social exchange theory, crisis theory, evolutionary theory and Bowlby's attachment theory has been used in the studies on marital relations (Cabrera Garcia & Aya Gómez, 2014). Social exchange theory was used to find out the reason behind formation, continuous and end of relationships (Amato & Hohmann-Marriott, 2007).

According to Levinger's, theory of divorce is on the basis of this theoretical tradition. Attraction, barriers and alternatives form the three basic components of this theory (Collett, 2010). To a spouse, attraction is related to the rewards she/he receives from the relationship minus the costs of the relationship. Rewards refer to positive features such as love, happiness, respect, sex, trust, companionship and socioeconomic resources. Costs refer to negative features such as violence in relationship (Siennick, Stewart & Staff, 2014). Base on Levinger, barriers are including religious or moral values, limiting laws, financial dependency of spouse, concern about social stain and sense of obligation to the children, spouse and members of the extended family (Previti & Amato, 2003).

The decision of Spouses in a distressed relation may be to stay together due to the fact that divorce is against their religious values (Amato, Hohmann, & Marriott, 2007).

The cohesion of marriage can be seen in terms of rewards rather than alternatives or barriers. Good communication, love, respect and friendship are often cited. The existence of alternatives to marriage can weaken the stability of marriage. However, the absence of them can strengthen the stability of marriage. Based on this vision, those individuals who are satisfied with their marriage to some degree may think about leaving their spouse if they are persuaded that another relationship can lead to more rewards. In a parallel manner, dissatisfied married couples may stay in their married relationship if they are persuaded that there is not any permanent alternatives to marriage. Some couples believe that it is better to be alone than to be in an unrewarding marriage (Amato, Hohmann & Marriott, 2007). The fact that the needs of individuals are satisfied or could be better satisfied elsewhere affects the satisfaction which is the positive emotions that is directed toward a relationship (Previti and etal, 2003). The costs and benefits of the relationship are evaluated by the individuals when they decided whether they are happy with a particular relationship or not. Individuals, then, contrast the balance with a standard that is expected considering their condition in the relationship (comparison level [CL]) and what they can probably achieve in an alternative relationship (alternatives' comparison level [CLalt]). Relationships with consequences that fall below the CL are generally dissatisfying and those above the CL are often satisfying. The relationship stability is affected by the relation among CLalt and consequences. When individuals think that they could find better consequences elsewhere (CLalt), particularly when the current relationship is not satisfying (CL), they most likely leave the relationship (Nimtz, 2011). Despite the possibility of attractive alternatives, individuals do not always leave dissatisfying relationships. According to Rusbult, this can be due to the fact that individuals often invest resources in the relationship which may be reduced or lost in value if they leave the relationship. Direct investments including time or self-disclosure are placed in to the relationship for its progress (Collett, 2010).

Studying the reasons that keep dissatisfied couples in marriage is of benefit. The beneficial influences of marriage are not particular to those who create good relationship and marriage. However, this is against the advantages of marriage occurring solely to individuals in well-functioning and happy marriages. For example, studies on the 'psychophysiology of marriage' shows that the immune system of couples that are in distressed marriage gradually decrease. The signs of health and happiness are less in them (Rutter, 2009). This is particularly important because according to Norval Glenn, only 1 in 4 pairs are still married and at the minimum happiness with their married life a decade after marriage. It needs to be shown that being in a "conflict-ridden" or "empty shell" marriage which are two common marital conditions is better than never getting married or leaving such marriage. Good and pleasant marriages are better for individuals than other lifestyles' good version (Huston & Melz, 2004). Who stays in a bad marriage? It is likely that individuals who stay in a poor marriage be less sensitive to martial problem than those who leave it (Huston & Melz, 2004). Many individuals divorce for reasons that some would regard as minor such as not living each other sufficient or not communicating well (Kalmijn & Moden, 2006). They may have other reasons for their divorce. Individuals who divorce because of insignificant reasons are more likely to have nontraditional family values, which may cause them to feel less distressed when they divorce (Kalmijn & Monden, 2006). The purpose of this study was to find out the factors

that make dissatisfied married individuals to hold their marriage together.

## 2. Methods

The examination of literature revealed that there is a need of research that investigates dissatisfied couple's description of their marriage functions that caused them to stay married. Various studies have investigated qualitative family research via qualitative approach (Ganong & Coleman, 2014). This approach is specially related to marriage researches as it focuses on interactions between couples and emotional dynamics, which are the best to marriage and hard to study by quantitative method (Hurst, 2005). According to Dixon, one type of methods in qualitative approach that frequently used in the marriage researches is phenomenological methods (Dixon, 2013). Phenomenology looks for bringing meaning to a universally experienced phenomenon. The fundamental aim permits the researcher to diminish personal experiences with a phenomenon to the essence of its nature (Van Manen, 2015). The researcher collects narratives from participants who have experienced the phenomenon, and expand a synthesized representation of the nature for all of the individuals (Creswell, 2012).

According to Moustakas, determining what an experience meant to the individuals who had the experience and were capable of providing a comprehensive description of specific experience can be considered as the purpose of phenomenological method (Dixon, 2013).

In order to select participants, the researchers used purposive sampling. The sampling here is confined to specific types of participants who can provide the desired facts, either because they are the only ones who experience it, or fit in to some criteria state by the researchers (Sekaran & Bougie, 2010). In this regard, the researcher obtained information from specific participants who had attended the counseling center in Ahvaz and they had dissatisfied marriage experiences. Furthermore the Enrich Marital Satisfaction Inventory including 47 questions and demographic information questionnaire were used to choose the participants who were dissatisfied with their marriage. The Enrich questionnaire uses 5 points Likert scale (>70 = "most marital satisfaction"; 60-70 = "high level marital satisfaction"; 40-60 = "medium level marital satisfaction"; 30-40 = "unsatisfied marital"; <30 = "severe marital dissatisfaction"). According to Creswell (2007), a homogenous sample of 5 to 25 participants is recommended for phenomenological researches. The researchers predict a discontinuation of fresh data at some point in the interview process when the researcher can no longer gain any new themes from the interview and it reaches a saturation point (Creswell, 2012). Based on this, the researchers selected 12 participants that had several criteria as follows:

1. Dissatisfied individual married that have been married for a minimum of 3 years
2. They have at least one child
3. Dissatisfied individual married that have scored <30 and between 30-40

When the interview was completed, the information from the audio recording was transcribed. The researcher aimed to provide high ethical standards in protecting the participants to have the transcriptionist sign a confidentiality agreement. The raw information was then transcribed. In addition, the researchers analyze themes for each participant interview and create a thematic analysis of the transcriptions. Van Manen (2015) mentioned that a theme is a form of capturing the phenomenon or lived experience by which the person is debate on in the interview. Three outside reviewers will analyze the data and provide feedback to the researcher to increase the trustworthiness of the analysis.

## 3. Results

Themes extracted from data analysis from interviews include 6 main themes and 20 ancillary themes. The factors are shown in Table 1. The main themes include psychological function, sexual function, child related function, value related function, economic function, and social function, each of which consists of some secondary 'sub-themes'. Social function includes higher social acceptance and prestige, higher level of social security and freedom, higher rates of independence and self-confidence, and expansion of social and familial networks. Moreover, economic function –another major theme- consists of planning for future and higher rates of economic growth and better related management on the one hand and economic support- of higher relevance for women. Psychological function of marriage is another major theme including the sub-themes 'provision of emotional needs, calmness and companionship'. From among other functions indicated by married individuals, is sexual function composed of giving sexual needs in proper framework and having safe sexual intercourse. Child-related function is another function of marriage thought of as being composed of experiencing fatherhood and motherhood by parents, as well as creating and retaining a new generation. In addition, married individuals made note of value related function- an extensive function including sub-themes improving patience; enhancing forgiveness, adaptation, flexibility and responsibility; winning God's satisfaction, and that of parents; acting on

the basis of the Holy Prophet's tradition; enhancement of resistance and resiliency in hardships, and adding to psychological realism and maturity.

#### 4. Discussion

As mentioned in the previous section, this study intends to investigate why dissatisfied spouses stay married. In order to obtain this research objective, based on the interviews researchers developed a framework that provides various factors which keep dissatisfied spouses in their marital life. According to the results of the investigation with 12 participants, this study found 6 main themes and 25 sub-themes, as shown in Table 1.

This study demonstrates that psychological theme is one of the factors that keep dissatisfied couples stay married. In the prior study, Siennick et al. (2014) mentioned that love, happiness, respect, trust, and companionship, which are related to the psychological function. In our study, are positive aspects in the attraction component. This statement is aligned with the results of our study.

Companionship which is one of the psychological functions also helps dissatisfied spouses hold their marriage. Although a wife or a husband might be dissatisfied with the spouse's manner, but this aspect can prevent him/her from feeling alone in life. Therefore, one of the vital needs will be fulfilled with the presence of his/her spouse in marital life.

Similar to the psychological function, sex function is one of the aspects that keep dissatisfied spouses in their marriage. According to some of the respondents having a safe sexual intercourse can help reduce tensions and after an enjoyable sexual relation a lot of tensions fade away.

Participants pointed out since they can have safer sexual relations in marriage rather than outside of it, meeting the sexual needs is one of the important marriage functions. Based on their point of view, the fact that couples respect physical, mental and emotions of each other, makes sexual relation in a marriage different from the sexual relations out of marriage structure. In contrast to other researches Onyishi et al., found a positive relationship between the number of children and marital satisfaction. Onyishi et al mentioned that the number of children is a stronger predictor than education and wealth (Barongo et al., 2015). In the social exchange theory child is recognized as a barrier while based on the analysis results, child – related functions is considered as an attraction component. Believe that being able to experiencing parenthood, creating and retaining a new generation, is one the function of marriage that help them to stay married.

This study found that value function is considered as an attraction component, since it may give an opportunity for every spouse to become more mature emotionally in a relationship. In social exchange theory, however, the moral or religious values are reflected as barriers to make dissatisfied partners stay married (Previti & Amato, 2003). Based on social exchange theory, religious and values contain barriers; it means individuals are forced to stay in their marriage because of their religious beliefs. While participants of the current study identified these functions as positive points of their marriage. This kind of interpretation from life experiences refers to their beliefs. They considered their problems as an opportunity to help them grow. In other words, participants explained in interviews although all of their needs and wishes may not be met in such a marriage, but marriage makes people more mature, patient, forgiving and closer to God. Religiosity may have a relationship with marital satisfaction and stability, through practices of prayer and forgiveness. Having a better explanation of forgiveness would help us describe both religion and personality better. Forgiveness helps to recover and improve distressed relationships. It's mentioned that —forgiveness is an important factor that helps families to be successful and prevent failures (Lu, 2012).

Lu (2012) stated that forgiveness is considered as a process rather than an event. The next theme based on the interview and analysis of the current study is economic. As it regards in social exchange theory, socioeconomic resource is related to rewards that keep people stay married, but economical dependency seem to be a barrier that prevent couple from divorce; if couples come into marriage because of economical attachment, finally they may choose to divorce after solving this barrier (Siennick, Stewart, & Staff, 2014).

The respondents did not consider the financial function in their marital life as a barrier because they have probably different perspectives in looking at the economic support. They stated, if they have to leave marriage they eventually can solve economic problems and manage their lives. Although it will be difficult to do it alone, it is not impossible. They view the economical function as a way to have better financial management, better plan for their future, economic growth, and financial support, consequently they believe this function is a rewards. The respondents referred to increased social acceptance, Independence and self-confidence, expanding familial and social networks and social security as rewards in their marriage, however some of them mentioned that they are afraid not to be accepted in the society after getting divorced. The fact that stigma or other

disapprovals were not mentioned as barriers by anyone shows that divorce's social acceptance was common and prevalent by 1983 (Previti & Amato, 2003). Our data do not support the previous study since most of our interviews refer to the social acceptance as one of the factors that hold their marriage together. Why did our study yield different results? It shows some different aspects of divorce acceptance among various cultures. These differences are really important to be considered in studies of marriage and family life. This study, like most studies, has several limitations. The first limitation is that some barriers and rewards are not easy to be categorized. For example, social acceptance is regarded as a reward in this study. However, some people view it as a barrier. The second limitation is that the power of every barrier or reward that was mentioned by the participants could not be evaluated in this study. All participants were given an equal weight as there was not any way to assign the weights to the responses of participants which an unlikely assumption. The third limitation is that, this survey covers the data of only one spouse. Therefore, the vision of both spouses could not be merged. Studies on divorce and marital satisfaction that does not include information from both spouses do not have complete information. Finally, participants of this study were limited to married individuals living in Ahvaz, Iran, who had reported a low level of marital satisfaction. Because of the purposive sample contained a small sample size of one religious faith, culture, and only one location within Iran, Consequently the findings cannot be generalized to the overall population. The methodology used in this study is not ideal and demonstrates a major limitation. Future work should include Iranians in married with a wider scope of religious affiliation, and a broadening of the geographic locality of subjects. This study relied on self-report measures and in-depth interviews, with the limitation that participants may underreport or change various ideas. Furthermore, we do not know about the level of subjective well-being in dissatisfied married individual in order to compare their subjective well-being with dissatisfied married individuals who are divorced. Finally, a longitudinal study should be done in future work, as the present study evaluates marital satisfaction limited to just a certain point in time.

Table 1. Themes, connected coding and quotations of marriage functions

<b>Family Functions</b>					
Social Function	Economic Function	Psychological Function	Sexual Function	Child-related Function	Value-related Function
- Higher social acceptance and prestige.	-planning for future and a better economic growth and management.	- Provision of emotional needs.	- giving sexual needs a proper framework.	-experiencing fatherhood/motherhood.	- Enhancing patience.
- Higher social security and freedom.	- Economic support.	-calmness.	- having safe sexual intercourse.	-creating and retaining a new generation.	- Forgiveness enhancement.
-independence and self-confidence.		-companionship.			- More adaptability, flexibility, and responsibility.
- Expansion of the network of relatives and friends.					- God's satisfaction and acting upon Prophet's tradition.
- I have had higher leeway after marriage and have been able to have social activity more easily than before.	- We have to manage affairs so that our children will have to face less hardship in a future.	- You know... everyone of us needs to love someone; someone whose focus is mainly on us.	- To me, when someone gets married, they implicitly accept a framework; they become committed.	- Being a father is really a good feeling. I feel proud of having such a son.	-parents' satisfaction.
- Compared to single, divorced, or widowed	- I have no worries over daily expenses or the trades	- Marriage really wins you calmness.	- Having sexually satisfied with	- We are the superior creatures on earth, and if we do not bear children, our generation will not sustain.	-growing strong against hardships.
		In spite of all the			-realism and psychological maturity.
					- when my husband shouts and I can shout back, but I don't do it because of the calmness in our life and in children, I think to myself 'this is me!...
					I am now much more patient than the past.
					- I have been told from early in childhood that "Forgiveness starts from people of greater personalities"; and this is why I don't feel a loser

<p>individuals, I can present myself in the society more easily.</p> <p>- After a certain age you just think you like to have an independent life beside your spouse and children; it gives you a feeling of self-confidence.</p> <p>- My husband family accept me as a valuable person, they consults me over many issues.</p>	<p>my husband is engaged with. I can readily focus on doing different things or nurturing our kids.</p>	<p>problems, sufferings, concerns, annoyances, if I'm asked whether I recommend marriage or not, I would say Yes.</p>	<p>me, he won't like to have extra marital relationships, and this happens automatically.</p>	<p>when I forgive someone.</p> <p>- My husband's irresponsibility, made me to solve my problem by myself, added to my responsibility level, and take many big decision alone.</p> <p>- I reckon our religious beliefs and considering God has helped us stay in our marriages (an implication of this dissatisfaction with marital life).</p> <p>- At the moment, my father and my mother are old. They were always worried about me getting alone if they would pass away. They are now quite sure I'm not alone; they are happy they have been able to see their grandchild finally.</p> <p>- When my husband gets nervous, he frequently uses bad words and phrases like "you don't understand anything; you no nothing!"; I decided not to get very happy with his complements, and not get very sad with his blames and contempt. This is what I have gained. I also grow stronger after I gave birth to my child. I am now a firm and strong woman.</p> <p>-I have had a series of experiences in life that have made me a man with good policy. I don't know if it is good or bad, but it has been useful for me; for example I used to tell my wife everything and many of what I had said was later used against my interests. For instance, I honestly told my wife how much money I had; and she immediately asked me to spend all the money not thinking that something unexpected might happen in the future</p>
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