

Comparison of Marital Satisfaction in the Elderly and Non-Elderly and Related Factors in 2012

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Abstract

Background: Marital satisfaction is a crucial component of emotional stability of couples and plays a vital role in the function of family and society. Therefore, investigating the causes and factors affecting this category is of particular importance.

Objectives: The present study aims to compare marital life satisfaction in the elderly and non-elderly people and related factors in 2012.

Methods: A descriptive cross-sectional study was performed on 257 men and women covered by healthcare centers of Kashan University of Medical Sciences in 2012. The instruments used included the ENRICH marital satisfaction inventory and the demographic characteristics questionnaire. Data were analyzed using SPSS-16 and descriptive and analytical statistics (chi-square, independent t-test, one-way analysis of variance, and Tukey post-hoc test). (P-value<0.05).

Results: The results revealed that marital satisfaction in the non-elderly group (11.370±511.50) was significantly higher than the elderly group (10.296±901.55) (P<0.05). Examining the factors related to the level of marital satisfaction, it was found that the components of income level, occupation, and level of education in both groups were directly related to the marital satisfaction score. The number of children in the non-elderly group is inversely and in the elderly group was directly related to marital satisfaction (P<0.05).

Conclusion: It seems necessary to make decisions to improve the factors related to marital satisfaction in the elderly as the elderly population is growing. Moreover, to achieve the standard levels of health, it is necessary to pay attention to all aspects of health in different age groups.

Keywords: marital satisfaction, elderly, non-elderly

Introduction

Marital satisfaction is one of the most important components of emotional stability of couples [1]. And it is one of the primary and vital aspects in the marital relationship, playing an important role in the family function, i.e. the mental and cognitive perception of individuals from their marital relations [2]. In other words, it is the feeling of satisfaction experienced by the couple [3]. Marital adjustment and satisfaction occur over time because it requires the recognition of

personality traits, behavioral patterns, and adaptation of styles [4,5]. Marital satisfaction affects many aspects of human life and improves family function and facilitates the role of parenting, increases the health and longevity of couples, and augments life satisfaction [6,7]. In other words, marital relations can be a source of happiness or, conversely, a source of couple suffering [8,9], so the pleasant and tranquilizing relationship of the couple not only provides a suitable substrate for the growth, flourishing, and

excellence of their personality, rather, this relationship is one of the essential needs of children, and in turn affects their growth and excellence [10,11]. This category is more substantial in the elderly since studies in this field indicate that interpersonal relationships are essential for the well-being and health of the elderly. In addition, satisfactory marital relationships have a positive effect on the physical, social, and emotional health of the elderly; this is one of the influential factors in life satisfaction for the elderly [12].

Hence, the role of marital satisfaction is undeniable due to its effect on family health [4]. In some cultures, marital relationships are the primary source of support and affection, while these relationships can be assumed the main areas of irrational and dysfunctional thoughts. Many couples find it difficult to maintain intimate and friendly relationships with each other because their expectations of married life are high and irrational. Also, many couples have high marital satisfaction at the beginning of married life, but this decreases over time [13]. However, other studies have shown that marital satisfaction increases with the duration of married life [8,14]. Lack of marital satisfaction has important consequences such as disruption of social relationships, feelings of isolation and loneliness, reduced life satisfaction, and severe family disputes [6].

During marital life, several factors affect the relationship between couples, leading to satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the marital relationship [10]. However, the components of the quality of marriage are different in different cultures [15]. In general, social, economic (income), and employment status, personality, cognitive, and religious factors, premarital acquaintance, age of the couple, the number of children [16,17], age gap with the spouse, addiction, education level, gender, illness, and sexual satisfaction [10,17,18], and economic status [10,12,14,19] are involved in marital satisfaction. Various studies have been conducted on marital satisfaction regarding different age groups and have rendered different results. For example, Nasir et al. and Bakhshi et al. showed that the longer the married life of a couple, the more satisfied the couple becomes. In contrast, the results of the study by Chou et al. revealed

that life satisfaction in young people is significantly higher than the elderly [12,14,17, and 20]. A study reported that marital satisfaction increases in women with age [4]. Another study found that women were most dissatisfied with marital relationships [21]. Also, some studies have proven that one of the most important factors affecting marital satisfaction is sexual activity satisfaction, which decreases with increasing age, hence marital satisfaction decreases [6,15,17,21]. According to the above, it seems that marital satisfaction is different in the elderly and young people, and in some studies, sometimes contradictory results have been obtained. Therefore, considering 2.5% growth of the elderly population in Iran and based on predictions that the elderly population will increase to more than 10 million by 1400 and also the importance of marital satisfaction [22,23], a study was carried out to compare the level of marital life satisfaction and factors affecting it in the elderly and non-elderly people.

Methods

The present descriptive cross-sectional study was performed on 257 male and female subjects under the coverage of healthcare centers in Kashan in 2012. This number was adopted to determine the sample size based on the study of Kavvo et al. [3]. Inclusion criteria included willingness to participate in the study, having an alive spouse, not having a known mental illness, having independence in doing daily affairs, Iranian nationality of both couples, and the ability to answer questions. The scientific and ethical content of the study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Kashan University of Medical Sciences with registration number 92018; written consent was obtained from all research units.

According to the official definition by the World Health Organization, an elderly person is considered to be over 60 years of age. And the non-elderly are considered to be under 60 years of age. First, eight centers were randomly selected out of 33 health centers in Kashan, and then samples were randomly selected from the list of people under the coverage of healthcare centers. Then, by going door-to-door, people were asked to fill the questionnaires; the questionnaires were completed by the questioner. If more than one session was needed to complete the questionnaire,

the telephone number of the study unit was obtained, and in the second time, the questionnaire was completed through phone call. The instrument used was a questionnaire consisting of two parts: the first part included demographic information (age, gender, level of education, the number of children, type of employment, and income level) and the second part included marital life satisfaction inventory (ENRICH questionnaire). This questionnaire was first developed in 1989 by Elson. The ENRICH couple questionnaire is a general measurement of marital relationships with four sub-scales including ideal distortion, marital satisfaction, communications, and conflict resolution. The questionnaire was administered by David Elson and Amy Elson on 25501 married couples in 2000. The alpha coefficient of the questionnaire for the sub-scales of marital satisfaction, communication, conflict resolution, and ideal distortion were 0.86, 0.80, 0.84, and 0.83, respectively. The reliability coefficients of the questionnaire for each of the sub-scales were 0.86, 0.81, 0.90, and 0.92, respectively. Also, the alpha coefficients of the questionnaire in the study of Asudeh in 2010 on 365 couples were 0.68, 0.78, 0.62, and 0.77, respectively. The ENRICH

questionnaire has 35 questions, and according to the questionnaire guide, the questions are answered based on the Likert scale including: Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, scored 1 to 5. Scores in questions 3,5,6,7,10,13,14,18,19,21,22,23,26,27,28,29,32,33, and 34 are calculated inversely, i.e. the statement "I completely agree" will get a score of 1 and "I strongly disagree" will get a score of 5. The minimum score is 35 and the maximum score is 175. If the person scores 0-15%, it indicates high dissatisfaction, 16-35% indicates somewhat dissatisfied, 36- 60% somewhat satisfied, 61- 80% high satisfaction, and 81-100% indicates high satisfaction in all aspects of marital relationships [24]. Data were analyzed using SPSS-16 software.

Results

A total of 257 people participated in the study, of which 129 were non-elderly and 128 were elderly. The mean number of children was 1.36 ± 3.1 in the non-elderly group and 1.65 ± 4 in the elderly group. In terms of income status, the average income was 670 thousand Iranian toman in the non-elderly group and 540 thousand Iranian toman in the elderly group (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic variables for the elderly and non-elderly

Variable	Variable level	Number (%)	
		Elderly	Non-elderly
Education	Illiterate	46 (35.9)	16 (12.4)
	Under the diploma	66 (51.6)	77 (59.7)
	Diploma degree and higher	16 (12.5)	36 (27.9)
Gender	Female	54 (42.2)	41 (31.8)
	Male	74 (57.8)	88 (68.2)
Occupation	Self-employment	49 (38.4)	66 (51.1)
	Public employment	39 (30.5)	36 (27.9)
	Unemployed and housewife	40 (31.3)	27 (20.9)

Independent t-test showed a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of elderly and non-elderly groups in terms of

satisfaction, ideal distortion, conflict resolution and the mean score of marital satisfaction ($P < 0.05$) (Table 2).

Table 2: Comparison of the mean rate of marital satisfaction with regard to the elderly and non-elderly group

Profile dimensions	Groups	Mean±sd	P-value
Marital satisfaction	Non-elderly	35.4±5.228	0.001
	Elderly	31.95±5.077	
Ideal distortion	Non-elderly	17.82±3.156	0.001
	Elderly	16.55±2.629	
Conflict resolution	Non-elderly	30.85±3.907	0.004
	Elderly	29.59±3.101	
Communications	Non-elderly	30.98±3.987	0.332
	Elderly	31.45±3.861	
Total	Non-elderly	115.05±11.370	0.001
	Elderly	109.55±10.296	

Also, Pearson correlation coefficient proved an inverse and significant relationship between the number of children and marital satisfaction in the non-elderly group ($P=0.01$, $r=0.22$). However, in the elderly group, there was a positive and significant relationship between the number of children and marital satisfaction ($P=0.04$, $r=0.17$). This test also showed a positive and significant relationship between income level and marital satisfaction in the non-elderly group ($P=0.03$, $r=0.19$). But, no significant relationship was observed between income level and satisfaction in the elderly group ($P=0.39$, $r=0.07$). Also, there was a positive and significant relationship between age and mean marital satisfaction in the elderly groups ($P=0.005$, $r=0.247$); in non-elderly groups, this relationship was inverse and significant ($P=0.001$, $r=0.315$). One-way analysis of variance showed a significant difference in the

mean of marital satisfaction in the occupational groups of the elderly group ($df=5$, $F=2.36$, $P=0.04$). Tukey post-hoc test showed that this difference was related to the housewife and self-employment occupational groups ($P=0.04$), but there was no statistically significant difference in the non-elderly group ($df=5$, $F=1.12$, $P=0.35$). Also, this test revealed a statistically significant difference in the elderly group with respect to the mean of total marital satisfaction in terms of education level ($df=3$, $F=5.43$, $P=0.002$). Tukey post-hoc test determined that the difference between the illiterate and diploma groups is higher ($P=0.001$). There was also a statistically significant difference in the non-elderly group ($df=3$, $F=2.23$, $P=0.01$). Tukey post-hoc test showed that this difference is between the illiterate and diploma groups and higher education levels ($P=0.001$).

Table 3: Comparison of the average rate of marital satisfaction by gender in the two groups of elderly and non-elderly

Profile dimensions	Group	Gender	Mean±sd	P-value
Marital satisfaction	Non-elderly	Female	32.7805±5.25601	0.001
		Male	36.6667±4.77558	
	Elderly	Female	32.7432±5.20027	0.03
		Male	30.8704±4.73863	
Ideal distortion	Non-elderly	Female	16.4634±3.39188	0.001
		Male	18.4828±2.84835	
	Elderly	Female	111.14±2.66719	0.59
		Male	16.6622±2.61333	
Conflict resolution	Non-elderly	Female	30.9512±4.70612	0.96
		Male	30.9195±3.35919	
	Elderly	Female	30.4815±3.20813	0.005
		Male	28.9324±2.86849	
Communications	Non-elderly	Female	30.9512±4.89873	0.99
		Male	30.9425±3.50865	
	Elderly	Female	31.2432±3.44352	0.47
		Male	31.7407±4.38774	
Total	Non-elderly	Female	111.1463±13.66	0.006
		Male	117.0115±9.64063	
	Elderly	Female	109.5000±10.44076	0.96
		Male	109.5811±10.26099	

Discussion

The results demonstrated a significant difference between the mean level of marital satisfaction among the elderly and non-elderly people; the elderly subjects showed less marital satisfaction. However, as the following findings confirm, there is a positive and significant relationship between the elderly groups regarding age. But in non-elderly groups, the relationship was inverse and significant, confirming the first finding. There was also a significant difference between men and women in the non-elderly group. Men had a higher mean value, but in the elderly group, this difference was not significant. Similarly, King et al. showed that marital satisfaction in women in non-elderly groups increases with age [25]. According to previous studies, marital satisfaction increases over time because couples experience less distress and problems over time, due to the transition from the early stages of adjustment and compatibility, which can increase marital satisfaction [8,14]. Bakhshi et al.

also confirmed that in non-elderly groups' women, marital satisfaction increases with age [17], contradicting the findings of the current study with respect to the non-elderly group. It seems that the difference in the level of satisfaction of the elderly and non-elderly groups is due to the higher education of the youth compared to the elderly and their greater presence in society because the rate of marital satisfaction also increases with the increase of interactions and communications of individuals [12]. In addition, in the first years of marriage, their marital satisfaction is higher due to the attractions that the two parties have with each other, while marital satisfaction decreases with aging, due to the decrease in the attractions of the parties and the change in desires and expectations of the couples. In addition, the frequency of sexual activity is an important factor in marital satisfaction. However, with the increase of marital life duration, the frequency of sexual activities decreases for various reasons such as decrease in the attractiveness of the parties, increasing job-related concerns, child care, etc; with increasing age, marital satisfaction also decreases [18]. In justifying the results, it can be said that couples whose common hobbies and leisure time are more are more likely to have increased verbal and emotional communications, and this will in turn

improve self-satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and physical and mental health [10,11]. A person who is satisfied with his/her marriage considers marital relations as a supportive relationship [16]. In our traditional and religious society, the social and religious participations of families in daily affairs have enhanced communication and understanding between family members. On the other hand, religious beliefs and practices may make people have more control over their anger psychologically and emotionally, preventing conflicts between couples.

In this study, marital life satisfaction was slightly higher in women under the age of 60 (32.7805 ± 5.25601) in comparison with the group over the age of 60 (32.7432 ± 5.20027), i.e. the level of satisfaction in women did not change much with increasing age. In men, marital satisfaction decreases with age. Ahmadi et al. also showed that women in the age group of 33.8 ± 56 years have less marital satisfaction than men, which is consistent with the present study [4,5]. Chou et al. also considered gender as one of the factors influencing marital satisfaction [12]. Laurenceau's study also confirmed that as communication patterns are more sensitive in women and as self-disclosure is associated with intimacy [26], the reason can be sought here because in the traditional and religious society of Iran, it has led to a lack of self-expression followed by isolation and dissatisfaction with married life, due to the restrictions that exist for women. In explaining these contradictions, it may be possible to point out the differences in the culture of the society under study as studies have also emphasized the influence of culture on the level of marital satisfaction and also because the components of the quality of marriage in different cultures are different from each other [15].

The difference in the level of satisfaction of the elderly and non-elderly groups is possibly due to the higher education level of the youth compared to the elderly and their greater presence in society. Another justification for this is the age gap between the elderly group subjects and their spouses because with increasing the age gap between couples, the rate of marital satisfaction decreases, which is consistent with the results of Rahmani et al [18]. This may have been due to the frequency of differences between the samples in terms of gender in the study population because

68.2% of the group consisted of the elderly and 57.8% of the elderly group were men.

Edwards and White stated that child loss is positively related with marital satisfaction [27], which is in line with the current results on the under-60 years of age group. However, in the elderly group, having a child had no effect on marital satisfaction. But, Guo and Huang cited the number of children as a factor in marital satisfaction [16]. Bakhshi et al. also considered children as one of the factors involved in marital satisfaction [17]. The reason for this difference in the elderly and non-elderly groups is probably due to the fact that in the group under 60 years of age, there are more occupational and intellectual conflicts, while in the elderly group, they are more inclined to have their children due to loneliness and empty nest syndrome. In addition, dependence on others, especially children, rises with increase in age due to physical problems and disabilities. Nevertheless, in the non-elderly group, the couples suffer more stress due to problems of child care, especially when they both are working outside the home and the mother has less time to take care of the child. As a result, marital satisfaction decreases. In addition, economic pressures following the birth of a child reduce marital satisfaction.

In the age group under 60 years, a positive relationship was observed between income level and marital satisfaction; the results of various studies confirm this [10,12,14,19], i.e. with increasing income, marital satisfaction also increases.

People with high income levels have greater marital satisfaction because low incomes and job insecurity cause concerns about economic problems, which in turn leads to lower marital satisfaction. And in a situation where there is job insecurity and the couple's income is low, the couple's concerns about money bring about conflict, which in turn reduces marital satisfaction [10]. Also, Zainah et al. (2012), Trudel (2002), Vijayanthimala et al. (2004), Chou et al. (1999), and Sadegh Moghadam et al. (2006) stated that marital satisfaction increases with increasing income, which is consistent with the results of the present study. Improving the economic situation also reduces the pressure of economic problems in marriage and thus improves marital satisfaction [10,12,14,28,29,30]. Employed people with

sufficient income have a high rate of marital satisfaction because low income and job insecurity decrease marital satisfaction due to concerns about economic problems. When there is job insecurity and the couple's income is low, the couple is constantly worried about money, causing conflict between couples, which in turn reduces their satisfaction with married life. Also, the spouses of employed women are mentally healthier than the spouses of housewives, and women's employment can have a positive effect on their husbands and children and their social interactions if it does not conflict with their roles [10].

According to the results, in the group under 60 years of age, no relationship was observed between education level and marital satisfaction, but in the elderly group, marital satisfaction increased with increasing education, which is in line with the results of Chou et al. in Hong Kong [12]. But it contradicts the results of Bakhki et al. [17] and Shakriano et al. [20]. As the level of education increases, couples' understanding of each other increases, which in turn can increase their marital satisfaction [16,17]. With increasing the education level, communication and dispute resolution skills between couples improve. However, other studies have proved that a large percentage of the elderly people has a low level of education [5,30].

Chou et al. conducted a study in Hong Kong and reported that marital satisfaction is correlated with factors such as age, gender, life status, years of education, chronic illnesses, dysfunction, physical complaints, self-assessment of health, vision, hearing, social network, social protection, and financial pressures [12]. Zainah et al. illustrated that the duration of marriage and the amount of income affect marital satisfaction [14]. Shakarian also showed that marital satisfaction is affected by various factors such as age, gender, number of children, education, and occupation [20]. Hosseini Nasab et al. also concluded that there is a positive relationship between religion and marital adjustment [6,7].

Conclusion

According to the results, factors such as the number of children, family income level, occupation, and education of couples have possibly a notable effect on improving the level of

marital satisfaction in society. Therefore, making decisions to improve the level of income, awareness and knowledge of individuals, and holding training courses focusing on sexual issues in different age groups can improve the physical, mental, and social health of individuals. In the elderly group, marital satisfaction increased with age, indicating the significant effect of familiarity with life techniques and skills in creating adjustment between the parties during marital life; therefore, proper training of life skills before marriage and trying to get to know the parties more and better can improve the health of society.

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Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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