





## Identifying Criteria for a Successful Marriage: A Grounded Theory Study

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aims to identify the criteria for a successful marriage through a qualitative approach using grounded theory methodology.

**Methods:** This qualitative study employed grounded theory with a systematic approach. Participants included 12 married individuals from Iran, selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews, analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding following Strauss and Corbin's method. Lincoln and Guba's criteria for trustworthiness were applied to ensure the reliability of findings.

**Findings:** The study identified five paradigms: central factors, causal factors, contextual factors, facilitating factors, and outcomes, encompassing 11 main categories, 21 subcategories, and 45 initial codes. The central category of "couple interactions" included emotional regulation, mutual understanding, intimacy, commitment, and satisfaction as key indicators of a successful marriage. Causal factors included initial attraction, emotional maturity, and family interactions during courtship, while facilitating factors highlighted family support. Contextual factors such as economic, cultural, familial, and individual aspects were also significant.

**Conclusion:** The findings emphasize that successful marriages are influenced by a combination of individual, relational, and contextual factors. Practical applications include incorporating these insights into premarital counseling, marital therapy, and educational programs to promote emotional well-being, mutual understanding, and satisfaction in marital relationships.

**Keywords:** Successful marriage, couples, qualitative approach, grounded theory

### 1. Introduction

Marriage is the first stage of the family life cycle and is considered a critical factor in creating a healthy society and a significant phenomenon. In this context,

partner selection is regarded as the cornerstone of family formation, carrying substantial importance. Marriage represents a new phase of life, encompassing a vital part of an individual's personal and social existence. When undertaken with the necessary conditions and sufficient

awareness, it significantly impacts the health of individuals and society, including reducing disease rates and violence, ultimately enhancing mental and physical well-being (Brown, 2019).

Significant changes have occurred in the nature of family formation, dissolution, and committed relationships worldwide over the past decades, necessitating attention from practitioners and researchers in marital education. Despite these changes, the institution of marriage remains valued by most young people, and establishing and maintaining a healthy romantic relationship is a key life goal for many couples (Khodadadi Sangdeh, 2023; Mahmudulhassan & Abuzar, 2024).

Marriages can succeed or fail depending on the characteristics, actions, and behaviors of the partners (Mazzuca et al., 2019). A successful marriage can be achieved when married partners strive to maintain their relationship through positive interactions and shared intimacy (Yoo et al., 2023). One indicator of marital success is the extent to which couples can preserve their emotional and spiritual bonds and their ability to resolve conflicts in ways that align with their cultural and religious teachings. Therefore, harmony within the family is not only a goal of marriage but also a reflection of the quality of relationships and the spiritual maturity of spouses in marital life. Harmony among married couples involves all aspects of life, from effective communication to equitable distribution of responsibilities. Achieving harmony often requires patience, tolerance, and appreciation of differences between partners (Mahmudulhassan & Abuzar, 2024).

Indeed, a successful marriage is the most significant and valuable asset and accomplishment for couples. In successful marriages, marital satisfaction and adjustment improve, fostering physical and psychological well-being. These positive effects influence various dimensions of individual health. However, despite increased knowledge about factors contributing to marital success, the state of marriage remains challenging and in decline. Therefore, timely, comprehensive, and scientific examination of successful marriages is the first step toward identifying vulnerabilities and improving conditions as much as possible (Odero, 2019).

Various theories have explored the concept of a successful marriage from different perspectives. According to Gottman, a successful marriage arises when couples can resolve the inevitable conflicts in their relationships. Gottman emphasizes factors such as revising and strengthening the relationship roadmap, providing clear

steps to address problems and conflicts, enhancing appropriate emotional responses, and integrating financial matters. From the perspective of integrative behavioral couple therapy, even the happiest couples may face differences over time, which is inevitable. Marital distress arises not from differences, disagreements, or conflicts but from couples' inappropriate responses to these unavoidable incompatibilities. Bowen's intergenerational theory posits that individuals learn the foundation of their interpersonal relationships within their family of origin, and couples' issues reflect ongoing interactional problems within their primary families (Khodadadi Sangdeh, 2023).

While some marriages end in divorce, others remain healthy and stable. Recently, a global trend has shifted focus from factors contributing to divorce to those enabling stable and satisfying marriages. Identifying factors that set marriages on a path to success can lead to reduced divorce rates and increased marital durability, stability, and satisfaction in society (Coffey et al., 2024; Hormozi et al., 2024; Mahmudulhassan & Abuzar, 2024). This study aims to identify the criteria for a successful marriage using a qualitative approach and grounded theory methodology. Grounded theory is a method that systematically develops theories, concepts, hypotheses, and propositions directly from data rather than deducing them from prior assumptions, other studies, or existing theoretical frameworks. In other words, grounded theory provides a set of techniques for inductively developing theory about a specific phenomenon (Çalik, 2022). Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the question: What factors, conditions, and outcomes are associated with a successful marriage?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study Design and Participants

This research is a qualitative study conducted using the grounded theory method with a systematic approach.

Since the researcher's aim was to identify the criteria for a successful marriage, the grounded theory method, a credible approach for theory development and model design, was utilized. Grounded theory is a methodology that derives theories directly from systematically collected and analyzed data during the research process. In this method, data collection, analysis, and the final theory are closely interconnected. The researcher does not begin with preconceived theories but starts in the context of reality, generating theory from the collected data. The theory derived through this approach is likely to be closer to reality

than one constructed by assembling concepts based on experience or mere speculation. Grounded theory, as it is drawn from data, is often more insightful, enhances understanding, and provides practical guidance. Using Strauss and Corbin's systematic and analytical approach, the researcher systematically sought to generate or develop a theory to explain and describe a process, action, or interaction related to a specific subject (Creswell, 2021).

The study participants included all married couples in Isfahan in 2022. Couples who considered their marriage successful were invited to participate through a public announcement. After an initial evaluation by the researcher (using a dyadic conflict questionnaire where participants with a level of one were selected), suitable individuals were identified as the study population.

In qualitative research, sample size depends on the theoretical saturation of the research questions. Sampling in qualitative research aims to identify specific groups of people who share common characteristics or have lived through similar aspects of the social phenomenon under study. In this research, interview participants were selected using purposive sampling of the qualitative type. Based on the study's subject, data were collected from semi-structured interviews with participants. From 20 couples who expressed interest in participating in the study, interviews were conducted, and data saturation was reached with 12 individuals.

## 2.2. Measures

### 2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. With the participants' permission, the interviews focused on qualitative processes and were recorded using an audio recorder. The structure of the semi-structured interviews comprised three sections: initial questions, intermediate questions, and concluding questions. The interview duration ranged from 90 to 120 minutes, depending on the participants' conditions, and continued in subsequent sessions if necessary. Open-ended questions were used to gather participants' insights into the criteria for a successful marriage.

## 2.3. Data Analysis

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed the use of trustworthiness or dependability instead of traditional quantitative terms like validity and reliability for qualitative

research. They introduced four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

To achieve credibility, the researcher spent six months immersing themselves in the cultural background of the participants to understand various aspects of their lived experiences. The interviews were coded by two additional psychologists. Participants were selected from three cities: Qom, Tehran, and Mazandaran.

Transferability was somewhat limited by the inability to conduct face-to-face interviews due to participants living in different cities and restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

For dependability, the researcher continuously evaluated the research process and the development of the theoretical model. First, the researcher repeatedly compared the theoretical model with raw data, refining the model several times. This iterative comparison involved drafting theoretical models for the first five interviews, comparing them with raw data, and revising them accordingly. A total of 25 distinct models were developed, which were reviewed and revised based on the commonalities among the paradigms and repeated categories, ultimately leading to the final model.

The second method of process evaluation involved consulting participants about the research process and reviewing coded data with two external colleagues. Purposive sampling ensured that the selected participants provided the most relevant information for the research topic.

Data coding followed the Glaser and Strauss method. Open coding involved reviewing notes comprehensively and line by line, generating concepts relevant to the phenomenon under study. As stated by Strauss and Corbin, open coding is an analytical process through which concepts are identified and the characteristics of findings are uncovered. In this stage, concepts within interviews and documents were categorized based on their relation to similar topics.

Axial coding involved integrating related codes into more abstract categories with shared content. Shared codes from the open coding phase were grouped and described as specific concepts and categories. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), axial coding links categories to subcategories and identifies their properties and dimensions. Lee (2001) emphasized that this stage organizes categories, properties, and dimensions derived from open coding into their respective places to enhance understanding of relationships.

Selective coding involved synthesizing and refining the core concepts of the research based on coded notes, themes,

and analytical memos. This final stage integrated and refined categories, creating a cohesive and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

### 3. Findings and Results

To address the research question—what factors, conditions, and outcomes are associated with the criteria for a successful marriage—open codes, categories, and main themes were extracted. The results of the research question are presented in the following tables.

**Table 1**

*Open Coding of Raw Data for Identifying Criteria for a Successful Marriage*

Category	Subcategory	Initial Code	Raw Data
Family Factors	Respect	Respect for families	Showing respect to each other's families
		Mutual respect	Respecting one another
	Family Status	Family interactions	How they treat their family matters to me
		Good family background	Having reputable parents
		Good family	Having a good family
		Family compatibility	Families being well-matched
		Family influence	Consulting parents influenced my decision
Individual Factors	Ethical Traits	Family authenticity	Having a local family
		Decency	Being decent
		Loyalty	Being loyal
		Honesty	Being truthful and honest
	Personality Traits	Good manners	Having excellent manners
		Kindness	Being kind and considerate
		Calmness and composure	Being calm and composed
		Rationality and tranquility	Acting rationally and calmly
		Attention to personality	Focusing on personality
		Goal-oriented	Being organized and purposeful
		Sociability	Not being rigid or formal
Economic Factors	Economic Security	Patience	Being patient during family problems
		Job	Having a stable job
		High income	Income was important to me
		Job reputation	Job type mattered to me
Initial Attraction	Appearance Importance	Economic advantage	Having better economic status than myself
		Appearance	Neat but simple appearance
		Attractiveness	Physical attraction
	Interest and Affection	Acceptable appearance	Having an acceptable appearance
		Initial interest	Do not marry without interest
Emotional and Mental Maturity in Marriage	Avoiding Haste in Marriage	Friendship and mutual interest	Having mutual friendship and interest
		Hastiness in marriage	We got married too quickly
	Avoiding Superficiality	Avoiding rash decisions	I spent a long time considering my criteria
	Avoiding Perfectionism	Opportunity for understanding	We had a courtship period, and I developed interest
	Seeking Counseling	Receiving counseling	We sought counseling before marriage
Family Visits During Courtship Marriage Continuity	Family Visits	Family interactions	We had biweekly family gatherings
	Marriage Stability	Communication skills	We talk often and resolve disagreements
		Conflict resolution	We address problems together and find solutions
Couple Interactions	Role of Sexual Satisfaction	Sexual satisfaction	We are satisfied with our marital relationship
	Couple Satisfaction	Satisfaction	I am genuinely satisfied with my marital relationship
	Emotional Support and Empathy	Deep understanding	I try to understand and support my partner when upset
	Honesty, Intimacy, and Commitment	Unity in the relationship	We are both friends and life partners
	Acceptance of Personality	Acceptance	I start with positive feedback and then address shortcomings
	Emotional Regulation	Regulation	Even when angry, I can control myself when my partner listens and shows empathy



Cultural Compatibility	Cultural Harmony	Family alignment	Our families get along well
Parental Support	Family Support for Couples	Family support	In the early stages, financial and emotional support was important

**Table 2**

*Causal Factors for the Criteria for a Successful Marriage*

Paradigm Component	Category	Subcategory	Initial Code
Causal Factors	Initial Attraction	Appearance acceptance	Attractive appearance
		Interest and affection	Initial interest
	Emotional and Mental Maturity	Avoiding haste in marriage	Hastiness in marriage
		Avoiding superficiality	Avoiding rash decisions
		Avoiding perfectionism	Opportunity for understanding
		Seeking counseling	Receiving counseling
	Family Visits During Courtship	Family interactions	Regular family gatherings

**Table 3**

*Facilitating Factors for the Criteria for a Successful Marriage*

Paradigm Component	Category	Subcategory	Initial Code
Facilitating Factors	Parental Support	Family support for couples	Family support

**Table 4**

*Contextual Factors for the Criteria for a Successful Marriage*

Paradigm Component	Category	Subcategory	Initial Code
Contextual Factors	Economic Factors	Economic security	Job, high income, job reputation, economic advantage
	Cultural Compatibility	Cultural harmony	Family alignment
	Family Factors	Respect	Respect for families, mutual respect
		Family status	Family interactions, good family background, family compatibility
	Individual Factors	Ethical traits	Decency, loyalty, honesty, good manners
		Personality traits	Kindness, calmness, rationality, sociability, patience

**Table 5**

*Outcomes of the Criteria for a Successful Marriage*

Paradigm Component	Category	Subcategory	Initial Code
Outcomes	Marriage Continuity	Marriage stability	Communication skills, conflict resolution
		Role of sexual satisfaction	Sexual satisfaction

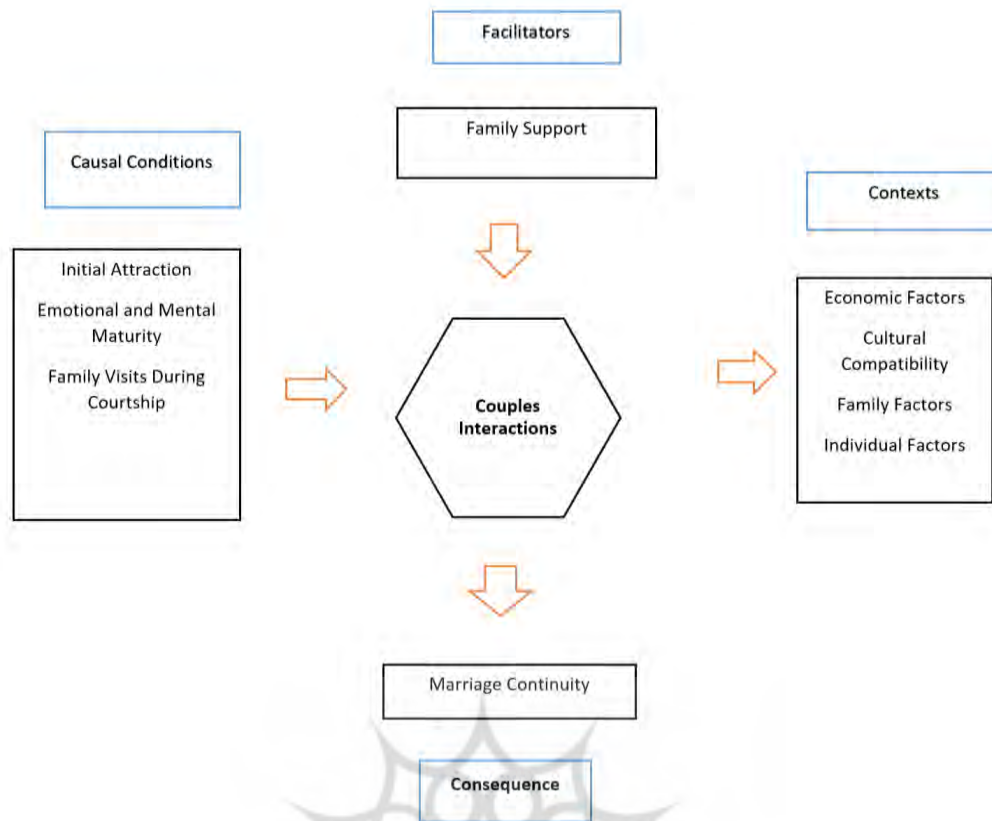
**Table 6**

*Central Category for the Criteria for a Successful Marriage*

Paradigm Component	Category	Subcategory	Initial Code
Central Category	Couple Interactions	Couple satisfaction	Satisfaction
		Emotional support and empathy	Deep understanding
		Honesty, intimacy, and commitment	Unity in the relationship
		Acceptance of personality	Acceptance
		Emotional regulation	Regulation

**Figure 1**

*Criteria for a Successful Marriage*



#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify the criteria for a successful marriage. The findings were summarized into five paradigms, 11 main categories, 21 subcategories, and 45 initial codes. The results are presented in the following paradigms.

The criteria for a successful marriage identified the central category as *couple interactions*. The central phenomenon, or main category, is the most significant concept identified during axial coding and is typically referenced more frequently by participants than other categories. This central phenomenon has analytical power and connects all categories to explain the overall subject. In this study, the central category comprised *couple interactions*. This category included subcategories such as emotional regulation, emotional support, care and empathy, mutual understanding, couple satisfaction, acceptance of each other's personality, and honesty, intimacy, commitment, and mutual agreement.

The more couples exhibit supportive and intimate behaviors in their relationships, appreciate one another, commit to each other and their relationship, strive for each

other's happiness, and agree on fundamental life issues, the more their marriage—and ultimately their family system—will achieve efficiency and success. In fact, in couple relationships, interactions become a complex process as they involve not only individual emotions and behaviors but also the spouse's emotions, personality, and communication. Couples, sometimes intentionally and other times unconsciously, influence each other's emotions, communication, and interactions. The ultimate and highest goal of marriage is achieving tranquility, satisfaction, and happiness, which increases emotional and psychological well-being (Black-Kutner, 2020). Therefore, couple satisfaction is considered one of the most important indicators of a successful marriage (Hou et al., 2019).

Participants shared statements such as:

*"When my spouse listens, pays attention, empathizes, and spends time with me, even if I am upset or angry, I can control myself,"* or,

*"When there are problems or sadness, I try to understand my partner and support them."*

Causal factors are those that lead to the creation of the central category. In this study, causal factors for the criteria for a successful marriage included categories such as *initial*

attraction and interest, emotional and mental maturity in marriage, and family visits during courtship. Indicators of relationship quality, such as romantic passion, physical intimacy, and relationship satisfaction, are critical for couples aiming to thrive and pursue a good life together. Globally, the shared goal of couples is to maintain or improve their relationships. However, for long-term couples, routine familiarity can pose challenges to maintaining romantic passion, physical intimacy, and overall relationship satisfaction. Without romantic enthusiasm, the quality of couples' relationships may decline, negatively affecting happiness, life satisfaction, positive emotions, and physical intimacy frequency (Coffey et al., 2024).

Emotional maturity is another variable that plays a significant role in marital life. A successful marriage requires not only physical maturity but also emotional maturity and readiness. Emotional maturity involves self-awareness, knowledge of one's partner's psychological characteristics, and the ability to manage emotions effectively (Sinha, 2021). Emotionally mature individuals are aware of their feelings and know how to express and regulate them appropriately. Participants noted:

*"Before marriage, I spent a lot of time considering my criteria,"*

*"I had a courtship period with my spouse before marriage and developed feelings for them,"* and

*"I was attracted to their appearance."*

Facilitating factors for the criteria of a successful marriage included the category of *parental support*. This factor, among countless others, can facilitate a successful marriage. Parental support in financial, emotional, parenting, and household matters can significantly contribute to marital success. A robust support network can help couples address various issues and create opportunities for healthy social interactions. Participants mentioned:

*"In the early stages of marriage, it was helpful to receive financial and emotional support from my or my spouse's family."*

Contextual conditions refer to specific circumstances in a particular time and place that create situations requiring action and interaction. In this study, contextual factors included economic factors, family factors, cultural compatibility, and individual characteristics. Success in marriage comprises attention to individual and relational factors, along with contextual and background factors. These elements lead to satisfaction with one's partner and marriage and instill a sense of awareness and insight into oneself and one's spouse. Olson (1996) suggested that a successful

marriage requires acquiring knowledge and skills in personality traits, intrapersonal and interpersonal issues, and external matters. Couples must identify potential future conflicts and use high-level skills to sustain their relationships (Stanley et al., 2019).

Participants expressed statements such as:

*"Income and job type were important to me,"*

*"Consulting with my parents influenced my choice,"* and

*"I paid significant attention to their personality."*

The criteria for a successful marriage also included outcomes, with *marriage continuity* as the key category. Outcomes represent the results of strategies employed by participants. These outcomes can be positive, negative, or neutral, short-term or long-term, evident or hidden, and limited or extensive. Marriage can act as a protective factor against life stressors and provide meaning to couples' lives (Grover & Helliwell, 2019). Marriage fulfills a wide range of psychological and physical needs in a secure environment and significantly impacts individuals' mental health. Effective sexual relationships are closely linked to marital happiness, and this connection is among the strongest predictors of marital satisfaction (Ziapour et al., 2023).

Participants noted:

*"We never avoided problems or disagreements; instead, we talked and found solutions together,"* and

*"We are satisfied with our marital relationship."*

Certain elements contributing to a successful marriage can be traced back to the couples' families of origin. Family represents the deepest psychological and social bonds through which individuals experience their growth and development as biological, psychological, and social beings. A healthy and supportive family plays a crucial role in shaping children's healthy personalities and interpersonal relationships. Parental support and their approach to their children's marriage are fundamental to fostering healthy, successful, and stable marriages.

A successful marriage is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be fully assessed through quantitative methods. These findings have theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, the results of this study can guide researchers in developing a comprehensive theory of Iranian marriages. Practically, they can significantly contribute to premarital counseling and addressing marital issues. Additionally, the results are valuable for creating pre-marital counseling programs.

## 5. Suggestions and Limitations

This study faced several limitations that may affect the generalizability of its findings. First, the qualitative nature of the research limits the ability to extend the results to broader populations, as the study focused on married couples from specific regions of Iran. Second, cultural and societal norms unique to the participants' backgrounds may influence the identified criteria for a successful marriage, potentially reducing applicability to diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, the reliance on participants' self-reported data may introduce bias, as individuals may present their relationships in an overly favorable light. Finally, logistical challenges, such as the inability to conduct in-person interviews due to COVID-19 restrictions, may have limited the depth of interaction during data collection.

Future research could explore the criteria for a successful marriage using a mixed-methods approach to complement qualitative insights with quantitative data, enhancing generalizability. Comparative studies across different cultural and societal contexts could identify universal versus culture-specific factors contributing to marital success. Longitudinal research could examine how the criteria evolve over time in long-term relationships, particularly focusing on the role of emerging challenges such as technological changes and shifting gender roles. Additionally, future studies could investigate the impact of specific interventions, such as premarital counseling or emotional intelligence training, on improving marital satisfaction and stability.

The findings of this study have several practical implications. Marital counselors and family therapists can use the identified criteria to design targeted interventions that address key factors such as emotional regulation, mutual support, and communication skills. Policymakers and educators could incorporate these insights into premarital education programs to equip couples with the necessary tools for building strong and resilient relationships. Furthermore, the results can guide the development of culturally sensitive frameworks for marital counseling, particularly in societies where family and community support play a significant role in marriage dynamics. By emphasizing both individual and relational factors, practitioners can foster greater marital satisfaction and long-term stability.

### Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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