

Psychosocial Attributes of Partner Relationship: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Partner relationship refers to the degree of intimacy, affection and contentment felt by the couple in their relationship. Psycho-social attributes plays a vital role in maintaining a harmonious relationship between partners. The objectives of the study were to explore the psychological and social attributes of partner relationship among married and divorced males and females. Qualitative design was adopted using in-depth interviews and focus group discussion techniques. Ten psycho-social themes emerged after content analysis; viz communicating within family, mutual understanding, trust and commitment, love and caring, Personal attributes, bonding with children, Influence of support system, satisfying sexual life, exploitation and conflict resolution and coping styles. The study can be useful in couple counseling sessions and pre-marital guidance programme for identifying and foreseeing the major psycho-social areas of concern in a marital relationship, thereby equip them to handle the discrepancies tactfully and effectively.

Keywords: Partner relationship, Psycho-social attributes, Marriage.

Introduction

Happiness and fulfilment springing from a harmonious marriage can play a crucial role in couples' lives, because these affect their physical and psychological health.¹ Traditional Indian society consider marriage and harmonious married life as an yardstick to assess reputation of individuals as well as to the family. The institution of marriage in Kerala appears to be facing serious glitches causing tremendous rise in failure marriages.² This trend is being reflected in family courts around the state, where divorce petitions are stacking up. The number of divorce cases filed in the family court during 201 was 11668, which increased to 19757 during 2017.

Many couples are capable to catch all the key ingredients which contribute to a happy and satisfied married life while others lack some elements in their bond which gives rise to consequences that are not always desired.³ Lack of trust, communication, mutual respect, love and understanding contribute to the deterioration of the bond resulting in adverse consequences like divorce.⁴

The current study used a qualitative approach to investigate the various psychosocial attributes which contributed to a happy and successful marital life and absence of which can cause serious issues leading to marital disharmony. The objectives of this study were to explore the psychological attributes of partner relationship among married and divorced males and females and to investigate the social attributes of partner relationship among married and divorced males and females

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Material and Method

The study used qualitative approach with sequential exploratory design using in depth interview and focus group discussion as data collection techniques. The study setting included different geographical locations

of Thiruvananthapuram district. The areas selected were rural, urban/non-slum, slum and coastal under the jurisdiction of Thiruvananthapuram Taluk. Those married below the age group of 60 years residing in rural, urban, coastal and slum communities in

Trivandrum district were the source population. The sampling method was purposive sampling and the key stakeholders selected from each category for the present study were listed below;

Table 1: Method, key stakeholders and sample size from each category

Sl.No.	Method	Key stake holders	Number of samples	Total Number
1.	In-Depth Interviews (IDI)	Experts in the respective fields	11	25
		Married men	5	
		Married women	5	
		Separated/divorced men	2	
		Separated/divorced women	2	
2.	Focus Group Discussion (FGD)	Rural women (1)	12	56
		Rural men (1)	9	
		Urban women (1)	10	
		Urban men (1)	8	
		Costal men (1)	9	
		Slum women (1)	8	

Point of redundancy was criteria for fixing sample size.

The data were collected from the stake holders using in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The IDI schedule and FGD guide were prepared with open ended questions, separately for married people and subject experts which included relevant topics to be explored with subtopics, probes and concluding questions. Prior appointment was taken before each interview in a place with fewer distractions. We obtained informed consent from each participant before the interview. The interviews were audio recorded with permission. FGD was conducted in 6 settings arranged with the help of a contact person from a selected area. Informed consent for participation and audio recording of discussion was taken from participants. Sociogram of the FGDs was made and notes were also taken by two assistants.

Data processing and analysis: The verbatim collected from each stakeholder were transcribed and translated. The steps of thematic analysis were; **open coding** where free listing of responses and pile sorting was done; **axial coding**, to find out the relationship between themes and sub themes and **selective coding**, where the data was summarized and a final model is formed. Thematic analysis resulted in the emergence of ten themes and sub themes under psychosocial aspects.

Findings: Ten themes emerged from content analysis seemed to be significant for keeping good partner relationship in the opinion and perception of the interviewees. They were;

Communicating within family: Majority expressed communicating within family, is the key to healthy relationship. The subthemes under the theme effective communication included form of communication, failing to let each other know what’s happening at house,transparency in communication and availability of quality time. Verbatim of interviewees expressed this.

“I always felt sitting together and talking is helpful in solving many problems. Discussing day today problems by each other relieves pressure and makes the bond stronger leaving little misapprehension”.

(Urban married female)

“He will keep silence when he dislikes something; if I advance again it will create problems and if I finish it there, everything will go well”. *(Rural married female)*

If the spouses failed to communicate their problems, feelings, needs, and expectations, their marital relationship can end up in failure. Fowers stated

that a well-adjusted marital relationship is enhanced by fostering couples with training in communication skills, which will help them resolve future marital conflicts.⁵ Couples are generally directed to improve their communication skills to increase harmony and avoid conflicts.

Mutual understanding: Most of them agreed that mutual adjustment in the family is a vital element in a successful marital life. Adjustment includes a wide array of sub themes like knowing the strength and weakness of the spouse, perceiving the needs of the spouse and responding accordingly, appreciate the likes and dislikes of the spouse, adjustment with in-laws, adjustment with work related issues (career/household work) of partner, adjusting with the recreational activities of other family members.

An interviewee reported *“In my opinion, understanding each other is very important as it helps to bear with each other’s weaknesses, interests and habits. I think, the one who adjusts with each other is the most happier”*. (Clinical Psychologist)

Understanding and adjusting each other helps in growing a health marital relationship. Mutual understanding helps to identify the strengths and weaknesses of spouses, recognize the worries and expectations, which helps to make the life easier to live and enhance smooth relationship between them. Findings from a study indicated that for wives, the strongest predictor of a healthy marriage is, understanding of their husbands.⁶

Trust and commitment: Majority of married women expressed that trust is another important factor of happy marriage. It includes sanctity and faith in marital relationship, be with the partner at times of crisis, and considering marriage as a social commitment-marriage is not only between two individuals but with two families.

“Trust is an important underpinning of happy marriage and if there is mistrust between couples, it is not good, then the relationship won’t last long. It is really tough to live with the person who doesn’t trust you because he/she makes your life a hell. So some spouses should learn to trust each other”.

(Divorced urban female).

“When you trust your partner you give him/her a certain degree of independence which shows a healthy

relationship. A distrustful partner can easily make his/her and his/her own partner’s life miserable with his suspicions and doubts”. (Social scientist)

Trusting your partner provide him/her with certain degree of independence, on the other hand a distrustful partner can make the marital life miserable. Hence trusting and believing each other has a positive influence on a marital relationship.

Love and Caring: Majority believed that love and caring has undeniable importance in marital relationship. Caring is a healthy expression of love. It includes protecting and supporting the partner, expression of love according to expectation and showing concern to the needs of the partner.

“Caring is a way of showing love and affection to your partner. Serving him food he likes, being dressed according to his choice, taking care of his likes and dislikes and giving importance to his wishes show that you care for him which in turn gain the love and acceptance from the spouse”. (Rural married female)

Caring is a healthy expression of showing love among partners. If spouses love each other but not showing their affection by any means, misunderstandings will sprout up in their relationship.

Personal attributes: Majority expressed that personal attributes like personality traits, mental health, habits, personal hygiene and life values of the partner are significant in maintaining a harmonious marital relationship.

“Personality problems of spouse are the major reason for seeking divorce by women. Doubtfulness, abusing in-laws, insulting the spouse in front of others, physical abuse etc is the various grounds they usually display for filing petition in court.”

(Lawyer Family Court)

Personality problems like aggressiveness and short temper among spouses create more problems and unpleasantness in their relationship. A study highlights that persons with more pleasant temperaments, were happier in their marriages.⁷ Analysis from another study revealed that husbands with poor marital quality had more personality problems than those with good marital quality.⁸

Satisfying sexual life: All most all of them believed that sexuality has an indisputable value in marital life. It

can be the major reason for parting among couples in a marital relationship. The subthemes derived in sexuality include satisfaction with sexual life, perceiving the sexual needs of the partner, forced sex against willingness and monotonous in sexual life.

“When he wants me, he came and does whatever he wanted to do, not at all considering my feelings and emotions. He considers me as a device for fulfilling his needs” (Divorced urban female)

Sex is an inevitable, natural, mysterious and tempting celebratory expression in marital relations. Sexuality stimulates a sense of bonding, compassion, unity and love among couples.⁹

Bonding with Children: Half to majority of the married women agreed that children are the core factor of marital life. The sub themes derived were involvement of both partners in child rearing practices, maintaining disciplinary actions and having dreams & expectation about children.

“I’m living with my spouse only because my children need father and mother. They are the striving force for leading my life forward”. (Urban married female)

Children play a significant role in establishing a strong marital relationship. Couples who cannot have their own children mostly remain dissatisfied with their marital life and mostly such marriages end up in divorce or husband’s second marriage.¹⁰ Childcare is also an important area of conflict among married partners.^{11,12}

Influence of Support System: Nearly half of the married people opined that support system from the family members, friends/peers and other religious organization can play some role in marital relationship.

“In-laws play a crucial role in the relationship between spouses. Too much indulgence by them in the personal matters of spouses can create problems. If they are good they will try to understand the spouses but if they are not good, the relation can end up in divorce”. (Divorced urban male)

Family structure and influence of friends can also have an effect on a relationship. In a joint family system, sharing of problems can be more which can ease marital problems, but some may feel it undesirable due to too much interference.

Exploitation: Some of them believed that exploitation is an important attribute which hinder marital satisfaction and adversely affect partner relationship. Exploitation includes psychological vehemence (getting belittled in front of others), inhumaneness by family members and abuse by family members. An interviewee stated

“He will never miss an opportunity to belittle me and my family members in front of others. It is more painful than making a slap” (Divorced urban female)

Conflict resolution and coping: Majority of the respondents viewed that conflict resolution and coping strategy has a significant role in maintaining good marital relationship. It mainly depends upon frequency of conflict between partners, style of approaching the conflict, process of conflict resolution strategies and seeking help from others for solving conflicts.

“Disagreements can happen in any relationship; often more common in marital relationship, but how the couple tackle the problems is the real challenging one. Couples should learn different strategies to manage and handle conflicts between them and develop skill in adopting various coping mechanisms to run a smooth marital relationship”. (Psychiatrist)

Major reasons for conflicts in Indian scenario are related to dowry and physical abuse, not giving equal status to wife and emerging nuclear family systems. Women are stressed at work as well as at home, leading to short temper and distress in all areas of life.¹³

Conclusion

The current study throws light to the psycho-social attributes which is considered to be most important for a happy and satisfied marital relationship. The psycho-social themes emerged were communicating within family, mutual understanding, trust and commitment, love and caring, Personal attributes, bonding with children, Influence of support system, satisfying sexual life, exploitation and conflict resolution & coping styles. Early detection of the areas of dispute among couples is significant since it gives a golden opportunity for early intervention, which will bring back the couple in a stable relationship. Although the above mentioned psycho social attributes are essential for a happy marital life, how a person rates these factors and how much importance he/she gives to each of them varies from person to person.

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Ethical Considerations: The investigator obtained clearance from the Institutional ethics committee before collecting data and has taken informed written consent from each participant. Participant information sheet was also shared which assured privacy and confidentiality of data.

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