



Volume 3	Issue 3	March (2024)	DOI: 10.47540/ijqr.v3i3.1297	Page: 278 – 287
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## Determinants of Marital Satisfaction from Married Individuals' Perspectives in Addis Ababa: A Qualitative Study

Shimelis Wondimua<sup>1</sup>, Tamirie Andualem<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Psychology, Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia

**Corresponding Author:** Shimelis Wondimu; Email: [shimelisw12@gmail.com](mailto:shimelisw12@gmail.com)

### ARTICLE INFO

*Keywords:* Determinant, Marital, Satisfaction, Qualitative Study.

*Received* : 17 January 2024

*Revised* : 01 March 2024

*Accepted* : 30 March 2024

### ABSTRACT

Studies have identified various factors that determine marital satisfaction. However, there is still a scarcity of studies that focus on the factors influencing marital satisfaction. Most previous studies have focused on deficit factors rather than strengthening factors, indicating a knowledge gap regarding factors that positively contribute to marital satisfaction. This study aimed to identify the factors influencing marital satisfaction from the perspective of married individuals in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) were used as data collection techniques. The data was collected from 15 participants. The study uncovered key factors that contribute to marital satisfaction. The findings include views about marriage, readiness for marriage, caring behavior, integrity, patience, and religiousness. Marriage practitioners, policymakers, and social workers could benefit from this study. The limitations and future directions were also discussed.

### INTRODUCTION

Marital satisfaction is an essential factor in the success of both individual and family life. It contributes to a prosperous marital life by enhancing partners' health and overall psychosocial well-being (Chapman & Guven, 2016; Robles, 2014; Wilson & Novak, 2022; Zimmermann et al., 2019). It is believed that individuals do not just aspire to get married; instead, they seek someone they love and can remain committed to for the rest of their lives (Karney & Bradbury, 2020; Kuo & Raley, 2016). Marital satisfaction has been utilized as an assessment tool to measure the quality of marital relationships. Important achievements and positive development as individual goals, such as personal growth and the well-being of the family as a whole, are only attainable when accompanied by a satisfying marital relationship (Abdul Azeez, 2013). Couples' performance and adherence to their roles depend on the level of their marital satisfaction. Besides, scholars have linked marital satisfaction with positive outcomes such as the attainment of life goals and emotional stability (Patel & Dhar,

2018), as well as success in communication and problem-solving (Zaheri et al., 2020).

Marital satisfaction not only promotes family stability and unity but also fosters positive marital behaviors, such as engaging in healthy behaviors instead of risky ones (Wilson & Novak, 2022), practicing forgiveness and emotional intelligence (Tavakol et al., 2017), and effectively managing stress and interpersonal relations (Holden et al., 2023). Additionally, couples who are satisfied with their marital relationship, report a high level of commitment and religion, can engage in role-sharing, and tend to communicate better (Timothy-Springer & Johnson, 2018). Marital satisfaction refers to an individual's sense of happiness and contentment across all aspects of their marital relationships (Hatami et al., 2009; Tavakol et al., 2017). Married individuals aspire to achieve a satisfying marriage as their ultimate goal (Heshmati et al., 2016). A satisfying marital relationship is characterized by trust, a strong sense of connection, emotional support, and a high level of care between the partners (Plooy, 2018; Steve & Marie, 2014).

However, nowadays, maintaining a satisfying marital relationship is challenging, leading to eventual marital dissatisfaction and divorce (Mekonnen et al., 2019; Røsand et al., 2014). Ethiopia is also not an exception in this regard. In Ethiopia, marriage is considered one of life's most important purposes and is highly valued by many people. However, in recent times, this important institution has gradually begun to encounter various challenges (Mekonnen et al., 2019). Moreover, individual factors such as selfishness and negative attitudes about marriage are serious issues in modern marriages (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Given the various challenges that couples face in marriage, it is crucial to study the factors that contribute to marital satisfaction, as it has a positive impact on enhancing happiness and health among couples (Abreu-Afonso et al., 2021; Lavner et al., 2016; Shafer et al., 2014). By understanding the factors that determine marital satisfaction, it is possible to cultivate healthy marital relationships. With this in mind, it will be essential to examine factors that enhance marital satisfaction for the well-being of individuals and families as a whole.

A successful marriage depends on several positive factors. In recent times, there has been an effort to understand the factors that positively contribute to stable and satisfying marital relationships. Particularly, the family strengths perspective and the positive psychology movement play essential roles in identifying the qualities that strengthen marital relationships (Braithwaite et al., 2011). For instance, scholars have identified positive qualities such as open communication, positive treatment of spouses, and forgiveness as crucial factors for a satisfying and successful marital life (Fincham & Beach, 2010; Skogrand et al., 2016; Timothy-Springer & Johnson, 2018). An investigation of marital relationships from a strengths-based perspective shows some progress in recent times. For instance, A strength-based study among African American couples identified positive qualities of marital satisfaction, such as communication, positive treatment of the spouse, congruent values, spirituality, and collaboration (Vaterlaus et al., 2017). Similarly, scholars have shifted their focus from marital conflicts and distress to the investigation of positive marital behaviors (Aydogan & Dincer, 2020; Aydogan & Kizildag, 2017; Fincham et al., 2011; Lenger et al.,

2016). For instance, the ability to be resilient in a marital relationship has been linked to the strength of couples and families, as well as enhancing marital satisfaction during difficult times (Aydogan & Dincer, 2020; Bradley & Hojjat, 2016).

While marital satisfaction-enhancing factors have become an important area of interest among scholars and marriage practitioners, there is still a lack of studies on this topic. Most studies on marriage have primarily focused on the negative aspects of marital relationships (Abdol Rahimi et al., 2012; Mekonnen et al., 2019; Røsand et al., 2014; Solomon & Brisini, 2018). Particularly, despite the growing body of research on marriage in Ethiopia (John et al., 2019; Mekonnen et al., 2019), no study has yet examined the contributing factors to marital satisfaction. Moreover, the existing studies that highlight the contributing factors of marital satisfaction mostly stem from Western culture (Karney & Bradbury, 2020; Solomon & Brisini, 2018), which may not be applicable to Ethiopia. The lack of strength-based studies in non-Western countries, such as Ethiopia, not only limits our understanding of the factors contributing to marital satisfaction but also raises questions about the relevance of psychosocial intervention programs designed to improve marital satisfaction in different cultures. By addressing this research gap, the present study may offer valuable insights for practitioners. It may also be significant for policymakers in their efforts to implement programs aimed at improving family health. Thus, this study aimed to investigate the factors influencing marital satisfaction from the perspective of individuals in Addis Ababa.

## **METHODS**

Data was collected from individuals in Addis Ababa. Given the qualitative nature of this study, purposive sampling techniques were used to select participants. A total of 15 individuals (i.e., seven males and eight females) were sampled. Data for this study was collected using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The interview guide was prepared in advance and used during data collection. The interview guide starts with questions that help establish rapport with the participants. For example, "How do you explain marriage?" The remaining interview guide questions ask participants to share what they believe

is essential for satisfying marital relationships based on their marriage experience. For example, in your opinion, what are the important qualities that make a marriage satisfying? Participants were assured that their information would be kept confidential. Following their willingness to participate in the study, interviews and FGDs were conducted at a convenient location and time for them. The interviews were conducted in the Amharic language and took approximately 35 to 40 minutes. The data was analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Before commencing the actual data analysis, the data was translated from Amharic to English. First, we systematically coded the data and continuously refined it to generate themes. Next, the themes were integrated with theoretical and empirical research evidence to develop a comprehensive thematic description of the data. Finally, we framed statements about the factors that participants believed were crucial in enhancing marital satisfaction. To address research ethics, we adhered to the following ethical protocols. First, we obtained ethical approval to conduct this study from the institutional ethical approval committee. Second, participation in this study was assured after the participants were informed about the study and provided their written consent. Finally, participants' anonymity was maintained by assigning pseudonyms when presenting the study's findings.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This study aimed to investigate the determinant factors of marital satisfaction. From the participants' perspectives, six main themes emerged as determinants of marital satisfaction. These themes include marital view, readiness for marriage, integrity, caring behavior, patience, and religiosity. While the first two factors were essential before marriage, the overall improvement of these factors contributes to a satisfying marriage. These factors create a favorable environment that fosters smooth relationships between partners, enhancing their ability to overcome the challenges of marital life. Practicing these qualities in marital relationships enhances partners' commitment to their marriage and their ability to communicate effectively. Each of these factors will be discussed below, including verbatim quotes.

### **Marital View**

Reflecting on their view of marriage as an institution, many participants repeatedly discussed its value in making their marital life easier and smoother, ultimately contributing to their marital satisfaction. In particular, participants emphasized how these views about marriage made it easier to enjoy their marriage and their relationship with their partner. This, in turn, contributes to a high level of respect for marriage and a strong commitment to it, ultimately leading to high levels of marital satisfaction. In most of their discussions, participants indicated the importance of valuing marriage to decrease the likelihood of divorce and betrayal. From the words of two participants:

My view about marriage is entirely positive. Marriage is respected both on Earth and in the eyes of God. Marriage gives you meaning in life and helps you concentrate on something that can change your life... When you get married, you become stable and focused on important things... I consider life without marriage a waste of time (Taye, male, age 45).

Life without marriage is like a meal without salt... There's nothing enjoyable about it. When you are married, you don't feel lonely... Instead, you feel that someone cares about you and warmly accepts you at home. In a marital relationship, conflict is inevitable. However, partners should remain committed to their marriage instead of choosing to separate (Helen, female, age 33).

Others view marriage to be the primary source of their happiness. For example, during our FGDs, a 40-year-old woman named Heran made the following remark:

I am happy to be married. If people are not happy with their marriage, what else can make them happy? When you are married, you miss your home, your spouse, and your children.

### **Readiness for Marriage**

The interview also highlights the significance of being prepared for marriage, which can facilitate the enjoyment of a marital relationship. Particularly, being psychologically and financially prepared can equip partners with the mental and emotional maturity to cope with marital problems. Participants discussed that marriage is particularly enjoyable when it begins with both partners being ready. According to them, partners should be prepared to

make joint decisions, take responsibility, and change any undesirable previous lifestyle. This, in turn, creates conducive conditions for the development of stronger marital relationships by enhancing partners' emotional attachment, sharing burdens, and their commitment to marriage. When asked what is necessary for a satisfying marriage, one participant responded:

For me, marriage is not something you just enter into; rather, you should be mentally prepared...Partners should leave their previous lifestyles behind, including watching football outside the home and spending a lot of time with friends... In a marital relationship, there is nothing that one partner owns alone; everything, including decisions, is made in common with your partner (Tola, male, age 42).

During our discussion with participants, a related idea emerged that highlights the importance of being ready to accept differences in thoughts. This readiness contributes to reducing marital conflict and promotes communication between partners, ultimately improving the conditions for satisfying marital relationships. Some participants also mentioned the importance of recognizing and accepting differences in ideas between partners as a normal part of the process. As one participant put it:

I used to believe that partners were similar in their behavior and thoughts. However, I have come to realize that partners can be quite different in terms of their behavior and thinking... Sometimes, partners may even come from different socio-economic backgrounds and cultures. It is natural for there to be differences in ideas, and these differences should not be the cause of conflict (Samuel, male, age 53).

Furthermore, during our discussion, participants emphasized the importance of financial preparedness, getting to know each other before marriage, and adapting their lifestyles to their income levels to sustain marital satisfaction. The most prevalent topic among the participants was reaching a consensus on financial management. Particularly, some participants described the negative effects of their partners' extravagant lifestyles, which resulted in higher expenses than income. They suggested that partners should strive to balance their expenses and income. A participant stated that:

It is not surprising to see some individuals trying to live luxurious lives beyond their income, emulating their neighbors... There is a saying in Ethiopia: "You should live according to your means, not according to your neighbor's"... Partners should focus on their own lives and spend according to their income (Girma, male, age 40).

### **Integrity**

Participants identified which marital qualities are crucial for marital satisfaction. In their description, many participants repeatedly mentioned the importance of integrity. For instance, they discussed how openness, honesty, and trustworthiness can enhance marital satisfaction. These qualities are crucial in improving partners' conflict resolution abilities, reducing doubt between partners, and fostering optimism about the future of their marriage. As quoted from Kidist, a 29-year-old woman:

In my opinion, the foundation of a marital relationship should be built on openness... Your partner is not just someone you share a bed with, you are together to openly discuss every aspect of your marital relationship. Keeping something good or bad hidden from your partner can jeopardize your relationship when it is eventually discovered. This can lead to a loss of trust in your partner and the relationship.

I expect my husband to be honest and open with me about everything. If he does something significant without consulting me, it will make me feel sad... It will be even worse if I hear about it from a third party, as it makes me feel worthless and devalued (Sara, female, age 35).

Some participants emphasized the importance of trust and honesty in fostering a sense of togetherness, safety, emotional connection, and collaboration toward a common goal. These factors provide partners with a reason to be optimistic about their marriage and remain committed to it despite encountering challenges. Participants openly expressed their happiness in being in a safe and genuine marital relationship. In the words of one participant:

You feel safe when you are with someone you trust, and you also become the kind of person who is ready to give everything to their relationship... The more there are no hidden

agendas between each other, the stronger the sense of being loved (Abebe, male, age 48).

### **Caring Behaviors**

The participants also identified the partners' care for each other as a significant factor influencing marital satisfaction. During their discussion, several participants emphasized the importance of exhibiting caring behaviors, such as being considerate, compassionate, and thoughtful. Participants also discussed the importance of partners caring for each other's well-being, which contributes to a better marital relationship by enhancing partners' sense of security and assurance that they are not alone. From a participant's account:

In my belief, partners should unconditionally support each other... A wife should show kindness and concern for her husband's health and vice versa... You mainly rely on your partner for support. Encouragement and compassion from your partner are crucial in a marriage (Chala, male, age 45).

Another participant added that:

As a wife, I should care about the well-being of my husband... When he comes home from work, I should assist him by cleaning the house, preparing meals, and getting him something to drink (Eden, female, age 30).

Some participants expressed their expectation for their partner to support them in all aspects of their marital life. They believe that there comes a time in a marital relationship when one partner requires support, hand-holding, and encouragement from their spouse during difficult times, ultimately leading to greater marital satisfaction. One participant stated that:

Marriage is a partnership where you rely on each other... My wife is the first person I turned to for help and encouragement... To find happiness in marriage, you need a partner who is always by your side, providing support like scaffolding (Mohammed, male, aged 49).

### **Patience**

The concept of patience encompasses how individuals handle emotionally challenging situations with their partners. Participants emphasized the role of behaving in a friendly and easy-going when dealing with a high-tempered partner to manage the situation. They commented on how the quality of patience among partners contributes to a healthy marital relationship. It

provides partners with opportunities to discuss their problems once things return to normal. By approaching an offended partner patiently, you can positively change the situation. From two participant accounts:

When partners engage in emotion-provoking conversation, at least one of them should behave gently... Patience facilitates a pre-condition for dialogue and discussion on the matters that cause disagreement (Helen, female, 33 years old).

It is beneficial to remain silent or out of sight of the offended partner, at least for a while... One of the partners should refrain from reacting emotionally... By demonstrating patience, you can help train your partner to behave appropriately (Chala, male, 45 years old).

The patience of one partner helped the other partner to realign and objectively evaluate the issues that were offending, thereby enhancing their ability to address marital problems. When one partner behaves patiently, it helps the offended partner to cool down and behave rationally. This, in turn, leads to a better marital relationship. From one participant account:

In a marriage, you may experience challenging times with your partner. During such moments, it is best to refrain from speaking and instead focus on resolving issues... In difficult times, it is important to have someone who can facilitate communication and make it easier for both partners to talk to each other (Sara, female, 35 years old).

### **Religiosity**

Participants' engagement in religious activities contributes to successful marriages due to the religious expectation of faithfulness and commitment to the marriage. In their discussion, participants indicated how comfortable and safe they feel being in a marital relationship with someone religious. When discussing religiosity, participants expressed a desire for their partner to be religious and a fear of God/Allah. It was believed that religiosity equips partners with the qualities of humility, forgiveness, and genuineness. This, in turn, fostered the partner's ability to overcome undesirable marital behaviors, including marital affairs, infidelity, and thoughts of divorce, ultimately contributing to a satisfying marriage.

I want my partner to be religious... Because I believe that marriage blessed by God is the happiest. When you invite God into your marriage, it fills your relationship with happiness and wealth (Heran, female, 40 years old).

This trait contributes to marital satisfaction by positively influencing how partners value marriage and their marital relationships. A religious person holds strong beliefs and has high expectations of commitment in their marriage. Religion also influences individuals to be ready for marriage, which contributes to the endurance of that relationship despite challenges. The words of one participant indicate that:

Marriage is a divine institution and a reflection of God's will... Once a person decides to marry, the decision is a commitment. Marital commitment is highly important for a religious person. (Kiya, female, 47 years old)

The present study investigates determinants of marital satisfaction from the perspective of married individuals. Participants discussed what they perceived as an important determinant of marital satisfaction. The findings include marital view, readiness for marriage, integrity, caring behavior, patience, and religiosity. From the participant's point of view, one of the repeatedly occurring themes was their view about marriage. They described marriage as something valuable, a blessing from God, and a reason for a happy life, which are important attributes of marital satisfaction. Consistent with this finding, prior studies also linked strong beliefs and a high level of attachment to marriage with high levels of marital satisfaction (Willoughby, 2014; Willoughby & Belt, 2016). The more individuals value marriage, the more committed they are to their marriage (Willoughby, 2014). In line with Willoughby (2014), the participants of the present study also linked high marital value with less thought of divorce and betrayal behavior.

Participants described readiness for marriage as another compelling factor that determines marital satisfaction. The participants linked this theme with their partners' readiness to make collective decisions, take responsibility, and change their lifestyles. Similarly, this study indicated that psychological and financial readiness contribute to marital satisfaction. Consistent with this finding,

Karunia & Rahaju (2019) found that readiness for marriage predicts future marital happiness. Scholars have thoroughly documented the crucial role of psychological readiness in marital satisfaction, confirming the findings of this study (Karunia & Rahaju, 2019; Kashirskaya, 2015; Ningrum et al., 2021). For instance, being ready for marriage contributes to marital satisfaction by increasing responsibility in marital relationships and decreasing the divorce rate (Kashirskaya, 2015; Ningrum et al., 2021). Similarly, the lack of readiness for marriage has been linked to various marital problems, such as marital discord and an unequal burden on one partner (Tsania et al., 2015).

Similarly, Ismail and Diah (2020) highlighted the importance of financial readiness and management in enhancing marriage satisfaction. In line with the current study, Leavitt et al. (2023) also identified integrity as a factor that enhances marital relationships. Furthermore, similar to the findings discussed in the present study, Odilavadze et al. (2020) identified qualities of integrity, such as honesty and humility, as contributing to a high level of marital satisfaction. Caring behavior between partners is another factor that contributes to a satisfying marital relationship. This finding is consistent with previous research (Plooy, 2018; Steve & Marie, 2014). These scholars discussed the positive impact of physical and emotional support from partners on marital satisfaction. Participants in the current study also discussed their expectations of receiving support from their partners to maintain satisfying marital relationships. Cooperation among couples, understanding, and respecting each other's needs are also discussed in relation to healthy marital relationships (Zaheri et al., 2020).

The participants in the present study noted that patience was an essential factor in experiencing satisfying marital relationships. Supporting this finding, Khojasteh Mehr et al. (2022) identified patience as an important factor in better marital relationships in their study. These scholars discussed the role of patience in enhancing better marital relationships and reducing hardship. Patience also contributes to high marital satisfaction by reducing negative behaviors such as disagreements and resentment (Khojasteh Mehr et al., 2018). They claim that patience provides partners with the opportunity to manage emotion-provoking situations, facilitating the conditions for

conflict resolution. Most of the participants in the present study also linked marital satisfaction with religious beliefs. According to the participants of this study, religious behavior was linked with traits such as forgiveness, humility, and marital commitment, which in turn contribute to marital satisfaction. Prior studies have also linked religiosity to high marital satisfaction (Aman et al., 2019). Being religious contributes to beliefs in the sanctity of marriage and the commitment to it (Aman et al., 2019; Collins & Perry, 2015), as well as behaviors such as forgiveness, sacrifice, and religious practices that help to sustain and maintain a satisfying marital relationship (Aman et al., 2019; David & Stafford, 2013; Timothy-springer & Johnson, 2018).

### **CONCLUSION**

The satisfaction of marital relationships is determined by marital views, such as how individuals value marriage. Psychological and financial readiness to enter into marriage were also discussed as important factors in determining satisfying marital relationships. The qualities of integrity, such as honesty, trust, and openness, were also identified as important factors in nurturing harmonious marital relationships. Caring behavior contributes to a satisfying marriage by fostering compassion, thoughtfulness, and support during times of hardship. Furthermore, the importance of patience among partners is discussed to create a conducive environment for smooth interaction. Finally, religiousness contributes to marital satisfaction by preventing partners from engaging in misbehavior.

This study has both academic and practical implications. An individual's view about marriage could provide insight into practitioners' intervention programs. The findings of this study also suggest that practitioners, including counselors and social workers, should prioritize premarital training programs that prepare potential partners for both the psychological and financial aspects of marriage. For instance, training programs in financial management, saving, collective decision-making skills, and respecting each other's ideas are crucial. Furthermore, our study findings indicate that essential qualities such as integrity, patience, and caring behavior are essential for fostering better marital relationships. This, in turn, informs

psychosocial practitioners to focus on improving various life skills, such as patience, honesty, trustworthiness, and openness, among married partners. By enhancing these traits, it is possible to improve cooperation, understanding, emotional connection, and problem-solving skills between partners. Furthermore, the positive role of religious behavior on marital satisfaction provides valuable insights for religious leaders and social workers. Religious leaders can enhance marital relationships by preaching to their followers to adhere to their religious teachings. Social workers can also suggest that their clients attend church or mosque, or read the Bible or Quran. Additionally, this study will also be relevant to policymakers who are interested in family health. Finally, this study also has academic implications in the field of marital literature.

This study has some limitations. The samples only included married individuals rather than couples. Therefore, we suggest further investigation of studies involving couples. Another limitation of this study was that the information collected was based on self-report data, such as interviews and FGDs. Thus, future studies should confirm these findings using quantitative data. Overall, despite the aforementioned limitation, this is the first study to explore the factors influencing marital satisfaction from the viewpoint of married individuals.

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