



FACTORS AFFECTING MARITAL SATISFACTION IN ASIAN COUPLES: A NARRATIVE REVIEW ARTICLE

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ARTICLE INFO

Received:

06th Jul 2017

Received in revised form:

20th Aug 2017

Accepted:

07th Sep 2017

Available online:

15th Nov 2017

Keywords: *Marriage, Traditional marriage, Modern marriage, Marital satisfaction, Asian couples.*

ABSTRACT

Introduction and Purpose: Marital satisfaction is one of the most important factors affecting the mental and emotional stability of couples and a successful marriage. This article aims at reviewing studies on effective factors in the marital satisfaction of couples in Asian countries.

Materials and Methods: This narrative review study was carried out on research articles conducted in Asian countries and published from 2000 to 2017. They were identified through relevant keywords and advanced search in databases such as Google Scholar, PubMed, Springer, Science Direct, Web of Science and SID.

Results: Reviewing the articles led to the organization of the results into three main categories of factors affecting marital satisfaction in Asian couples including demographic factors (type of marriage, age of getting married, age difference between the couples, length of marriage, education level of the couples, employment status of the couples, children and the economic status of the spouse), cognitive factors (mental health of the couples) and interpersonal factors (relationships, interactions, and international marriage). The results showed that a higher education level was related to increased marital satisfaction but great age difference, women's employment and having young children resulted in marital dissatisfaction in couples. For most of the studies conducted in countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan, the factor of traditional marriage presented conflicting results. In some areas, it resulted in couple's dissatisfaction while in other areas, it did not. However, in East Asian countries, the traditional marriage was often deemed a crucial factor in marital dissatisfaction of couples.

Conclusion: In Asian countries, women usually report less marital satisfaction than men. The stage of marriage (length of marriage) is a U-shape factor in marital satisfaction. Socio-economic factors affect marital satisfaction, and the wife's employment causes marital dissatisfaction. Therefore, since traditional marriage is still in practice in most Asian countries, the different factors will not be moderated and marital dissatisfaction will continue to exist.

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To Cite This Article: Nasrin Ghiasi, Alireza Hidarnia, Shamsaddin Niknami, Mohamad Esmail Motlagh, (2017), "Factors affecting Marital Satisfaction in Asian couples: A narrative review article", *Pharmacophore*, 8(6S), e-1173862,

Introduction

Marriage, as the foundation of family, is one of the most complicated human relationships, which has been studied and analyzed as a very common phenomenon in the social life of all societies. One of the main goals in marriage is having marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction is a complicated and multifaceted issue, which has been studied in various ways [1]. According to Schoen et al. (2002), marital satisfaction means an evaluation of marriage conditions and is a reflection of happiness and marital performance [2]. From an evolutionary perspective, marital satisfaction is a type of psychological state,

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which can have advantages (satisfying emotional needs) and disadvantages (reducing degree of freedom) for the individual [3]. It seems that factors having positive or negative effects on marital satisfaction vary across cultures. For example, in Japan in comparison with the United States, the husband's income is an important variable in marital satisfaction [1]. After getting married, people seek a life filled with happiness and satisfaction; therefore, having a successful life and enjoying marital satisfaction is more important than the marriage, and lack of marital satisfaction not only creates an inappropriate environment in the family but also causes family instability and the phenomenon of divorce [4].

Accordingly, marriage and family relationships are vital areas of life that affect the quality of all lives. Globally, marriage constitutes an important part of an individual's life [5], and the factor determining the quality of life and marital satisfaction depends on the society in which the individual lives and the ideology the individual believes in. In order to elucidate the issue, we can point to Asian societies where different sets of beliefs and different cultures dominate these societies while in western countries, this cultural diversity cannot be seen and different countries have more or less the same culture [6].

Therefore, the present study aims to classify the findings of those articles that have investigated effective factors in marital satisfaction in Asian countries. A better understanding of these factors can be helpful in consolidating the foundation of the family, having a successful marriage, and improving marriage counseling services.

Materials and Methods

In this narrative review study, we reviewed the studies conducted in Asian countries on couples' degree of marital satisfaction and factors affecting it within the 2000-2017 period. First, we used relevant keywords to search relevant studies through an advanced search in Google Scholar, PubMed, Springer, Science Direct, Web of Science, and SID databases. Second, all cross-sectional and population-based cross-sectional (random and nonrandom) studies which had focused on marital satisfaction in Asian men and women in the past 17 years were investigated. Then, 160 abstracts and 85 full text papers were read in depth. Finally, 64 papers were chosen to write this study. The findings are summarized in the "Results" section.

Results

Based on the findings obtained from the reviewed articles, factors affecting Asian couples' marital satisfaction can be summarized in the following three main categories:

1. Demographic factors:

Demographic factors are related to marital satisfaction and can have a major effect. Factors such as the couple's education level, age of marriage and age difference, length of marriage and employment of either of the couples [5] could affect marital satisfaction, independent of the between-couple factors such as the quality of verbal and nonverbal relationship, sexual relationship, and conflict resolution [7].

1.1 Age of marriage:

In all societies, there is a legal minimum age to enter into marriage which is taken into account in statutory or non-statutory laws, and people are not permitted to get married unless meeting this criteria. Regardless of what the right age of marriage is considered to be and the factors it depends on, it should be noted that age of marriage of the couple is an important factor in the durability of marriage [8]. Certain environmental, economic and cultural conditions can determine age of marriage in a society [3]. Most studies have suggested that the right age for marriage is 18-25 years and 24-30 years for women and men, respectively [5, 9-10]. Some believe that getting married in this age range is associated with higher quality of life and that getting married at an age under 18 for women and under 20 for men is very likely to result in divorce, failure or decrease in the durability of marriage [11]. In some studies, it has been reported that marital dissatisfaction can be witnessed both amongst people of older ages and people of younger ages; however, marital dissatisfaction among couples of younger ages is more pronounced [12]. Yamamura (2011) studied the age of marriage factor in pre-industrialized Japan. The results showed that the age of marriage was determined by culture and traditions in the pre-industrialization period, while nowadays no traditional pattern of marriage can be observed in Japan [16]. It seems that the right age for marriage is affected by culture and geographical location [14].

1.2. Age difference:

An appropriate age difference between the couple is an important but not a necessary factor in having a successful life and marital satisfaction. Some studies have found that a great age difference between couples is associated with low levels of marital satisfaction [12, 15]. Rahmani (2009) who visited selected hospitals in the west of Tehran, Iran studied 292 married men and women in the age range of 19-58 years. The results demonstrated that marital and sexual satisfaction in couples with less than 10 years of age difference was significantly higher than in couples with more than 10 years of age difference [16]. A great age difference between couples creates different physical, emotional, and social environments for each set of couples, limits the possibility of cooperation and emotional intimacy, and reduces the couple's satisfaction with their marriage. It was also stated that there is a drop in marital satisfaction in couples with greater age differences as exemplified by older men who despite their old age marry young women tend to follow a patriarchal relationship in their marital life [12].

In Iran, it is usually suggested that the wife should be 2-4 years younger than her husband [5]. Moreover, according to experts, an age difference of 6 to 8 years is appropriate for a successful life [10]. Generally, rules regarding age difference in marriage

cannot be generalized from one culture to another. This issue is defined in cultural and geographical structures and varies depending on each country's social criteria and traditions.

1.3. Level of education:

Education level and having studied the same major can be positive and effective factors in mutual understanding between a couple, since they provide strong motivation and a suitable cultural environment for verbal and spiritual relationship which is the basis for a deeper cultural and intellectual convergence [17]. Jain (2014) examined marital satisfaction in educated Asian (Indian) couples living in the United States. The results showed that the level of marital satisfaction was high amongst this group of couples. Given the qualitative nature of the study, it was found that living a culturally more peaceful environment had helped the couples to change their marital satisfaction criteria [18]. Angusamy et al. (2017) studied marital satisfaction amongst 200 Malaysian women considering different variables. The results revealed that marital satisfaction was significantly different depending on race (Malay, Chinese, Indian, etc.), education, job, and education level of the spouse. Furthermore, education level of the couples had a considerable effect on their marital satisfaction; higher levels of education in the couples were accompanied by higher levels of satisfaction [17].

Different studies in Iran on the relationship between marital satisfaction and educational levels have reported contradictory results. However, educational level is an important factor in choosing a spouse [19]. It has been reported that there is a significant difference between men and women in terms of educational level factor in Iran [14]; women, unlike men, show more tendency to choose a spouse with a higher educational level [20].

1.4. Employment of men and women:

Employment and adequate income are related to a higher quality of life. The results of Levy's research (2006) in Singapore showed that people with no permanent job or those who were unemployed during the previous year were more likely to separate and get divorced [21]. However, the rate of women employment differs across societies. Taban et al. (2016) studied the relationship between marital satisfaction and demographic factors of 90 couples employed by the Ministry of Health in Tehran/Iran. The results showed that the level of marital satisfaction amongst these couples was low [22]. Zainah [2012] studied the effect of demographic factors on marital satisfaction in 423 Malaysian women. It was revealed that the level of marital satisfaction varied significantly depending on income level and the length of marriage such that couples who had been married for more than 10 years expressed higher marital satisfaction than those who had been married for less than 10 years. Moreover, couples with higher income levels reported higher marital satisfaction [3]. In a study by Joseph et al. (2016) in India, marital conflicts were investigated amongst urban married couples. The analysis of 238 marriages in the city of Bangalore showed that financial concerns, division and management of housework, time management, and raising children caused a lack of marital satisfaction in employed couples [23]. In his study in the Philippines, Edsel Beja (2014) investigated the data on marital satisfaction in employed, self-employed and part-time employed women between 2000-2014 and discovered that the data did not differ significantly from the data gathered in the 1970s in terms of marital satisfaction for this group of women [24]. In other words, the state of marital satisfaction had not changed. Oshio (2006) studied 2,346,997 Chinese and Japanese and 997 Korean couples. The results showed that in all the three countries, women expressed less marital satisfaction than men due to the fact that, in addition to working outside the home, they had to do the housework as well. Chinese couples equally divided working outside the home and the housework more than couples in the other two countries. Japanese couples favored a traditional state of affairs and believed that women should undertake both their jobs and the housework. Korean couples experienced conflict over whether women should cooperate in working outside home or only carry out the housework [25].

Furthermore, in some Asian societies, it is believed that women's employment can help improve the couples' quality of life and some aspects of marital satisfaction if there is no conflict between their job and family roles. In Iran, women face the phenomenon of conflict between work and family, where family obligations are against work commitments because family responsibilities are traditionally the responsibility of women, and gender norms show that women's primary responsibility is still in the family. Therefore, women should focus on their dual role in their agreement; this source of stress reduces marital satisfaction and job satisfaction [26]. However, in western societies, compared to Asian societies, there is a different definition for marital life in a way that patriarchy has been replaced by equal rights for men and women, and working outside the home and the housework are almost fairly divided [27-28].

1.5. Type of marriage (traditional or modern):

Marriages can be either traditional or modern. Although in most cases of traditional marriages, people relatively know each other better and have more information regarding their partner and research results show that the traditional marriage is more effective in solving financial conflicts. However this type of marriage can prolong conflicts in families between couples, and thus reduce marital satisfaction [29]. Farahmand and Ahmadnia (2014) found that marital satisfaction is higher when one chooses his/her partner in a modern fashion than in the traditional way; this difference is significant in the men group [30]. Qadir et al. (2005) in a qualitative study entitled "*Couple satisfaction in Pakistan*", which was conducted in the form of interviews with 29 married women, showed that pressure from family (traditional marriage under the pressure of family) is very prominent in choosing spouse in this country, and that marital satisfaction is often very low in these women [31]. Yildiz et al. (2015) investigated marital satisfaction in Turkey amongst 279 individuals (164 men and 115 women) using different variables. The results indicated that people with a master's or doctoral degree reported a higher level of marital satisfaction.

However, the income level variable did not show a significant effect on marital satisfaction. Furthermore, the results indicated that couples who had gotten married as a result of friendship and emotional attachment reported higher marital satisfaction than the couples who had gotten married in a traditional way [32]. Soleimani et al. (2001) in a study on married men and women in Tehran, Iran, showed that there is no significant difference in marital satisfaction between the traditionally married couples and those married in modern terms, but that there is a significant relationship between the parents interfering in the couples' affairs and their marital satisfaction. Furthermore, the way couples got to know each other affected their marital satisfaction; marital satisfaction was higher in couples who got to know each other through their families than couples who got to know each other through friendships and the Internet [33]. Arif and Fatima (2015) in a study entitled "*Marital satisfaction in traditional and modern marriages*" of 75 couples in Pakistan, came to the conclusion that marital satisfaction was higher for couples married through parental advice and consent than those who married without consulting their parents and in a modern way [34]. Al-Tamimi (2009) studied the predictive factors of marital satisfaction in arranged marriages in Saudi Arabia. 549 people (246 husbands, 303 wives) participated in the study. The results illustrated that the relationship between marital satisfaction and marriage duration was not significant but there was a significant positive relationship between the development of love and marital and life satisfaction amongst Saudi arranged marriages. This means that they often started marriage with a moderate level of satisfaction; men maintained their satisfaction at the same level but the level of satisfaction in women gradually decreased over time. Some factors predicting marital satisfaction were different for men and women. For women, the scale of stressful events predicted lower marital satisfaction while for men disconnected attachment style predicted negative marital satisfaction, and finally for both secure attachment predicted greater marital satisfaction. In addition, when the economic status of the husband at the beginning of the couple's life was better than the economic status of the wife's family, marital satisfaction was high in both the husbands and the wives; however, when the economic status of the wife was better, marital satisfaction was at a low level for both the husbands and the wives [35].

1.6. Number and age of children:

In the past, a family was defined as a couple with some children and the mother being the children's caretaker. Nowadays, with an increase in people's educational level, the attitude toward having children (the children being boy or girl) has changed and many families are happy with having two children without caring about the children's gender. Furthermore, an increase in educational level and the information from mass media has resulted in families paying more attention to their children's healthcare [5]. A study by Zanjani et al. in Karaj, Iran (2014) showed a significant relationship between the number of children and marital satisfaction meaning that higher number of children resulted in greater marital satisfaction [36]. In some other studies, higher number of children was reported to cause lack of marital satisfaction [7, 15, 37]. Regarding the age of children, some studies have shown that marital satisfaction increased as children grew in age. Yamamura (2001) gathered data from China, Korea, and Japan in 2006 and demonstrated that the age of children affects marital satisfaction in these countries and as children grew in age, marital satisfaction increased. However, there was a weak relationship between the age of children and marital satisfaction in men. In addition, marital satisfaction was affected by this factor to a very low extent. It was also discovered that marital satisfaction in women whose children were still at a young age was lower than in married women with no children [38]. However, in two different studies conducted in Iran, Mirghafourvand et al. (2014) and Zanjani and Baghiat (2014) reported that age of children does not significantly affect marital satisfaction [36, 39].

2. Mental health and interactions:

Whether men and women are sure of each other's mental health is one of the most important factors affecting the success and durability of a marriage, since mental health problems decrease the chances of having a satisfactory relationship [40-41]. After getting married, there is a positive relationship between marital satisfaction and mental health [42]. Khalatbari et al. (2013) investigated the "relationship between marital satisfaction and emotional stability in 110 university students". The results showed that there is a direct and significant relationship between marital satisfaction and emotional stability [43]. It was observed that the incidence of mood disorders and anxiety in couples with marital dissatisfaction was higher than that in the control group [44]. Shahi et al. (2011) studied the possible relationship between marital satisfaction and mental health in 300 couples in the city of Gorgan, Iran. The findings indicated that there is a negative relationship between the sub-scale of depression and anxiety and marital satisfaction. The authors concluded that mental health can be a predictor for marital satisfaction [41]. One of the manifestations of psychological disorders is the existence of domestic violence. In a study on 430 pregnant women, Ramezani et al. (2015) suggested that 84.4% of the participants were subjected to domestic violence, and 55.8% of them reported physical violence. Marital satisfaction in these women was much lower than in women without domestic violence [45]. In a study carried out in India, Nagaraja et al. (2012) showed that marital satisfaction is higher in couples who have stronger attachment to their children and families and enjoy a better state of mental health [46]. On the other hand, marital satisfaction affects mental health. Chung and Kim (2014), in a study entitled, "*Does marriage really affect health?*" investigated the issue in the four countries of Japan, China, Taiwan, and South Korea from 2006 to 2014. The number of people investigated in the study was 8538, and the results showed that marital satisfaction is different amongst the people of different countries; overall, those who were satisfied with their marital life were physically and mentally healthier [47]. In a study conducted in Iran, Kondjani et al. (2007) investigated the relationship between marital satisfaction and psychological injuries in 245 women suffering from depression and anxiety disorders in the city of Tehran, Iran. The results illustrated that there was negative correlation between the scales of depression, anxiety, obsession and obligation and marital satisfaction but

there was no connection between phobia and marital satisfaction [48]. Even psychological issues like fear of men going to war affected marital satisfaction. Renshaw et al. (2008) studied the level of marital satisfaction in the wives of Iraqi soldiers and military people. It was revealed that when there were more military exercises and activities and husbands less often present at home, marital satisfaction was lower in women [49].

3. International marriages and intercultural relationships:

The role of cultural values in family relationships and marital satisfaction has been confirmed in several studies. Cultural differences play a very important role in couple relationships, and cultural tensions destabilize families.

In recent decades, major changes have taken place in Asian societies. One of these changes is international marriages, especially in East Asian countries. Between 2000 and 2007, international marriage increased by 11% in South Korea. Intercultural marriage requires individuals to adapt themselves to social, political, cultural and economic changes [50]. Jee and Seol (2008) studied the level of marital satisfaction in marriages between Korean men and non-Korean women. The results showed that some Chinese-Korean women with the idea that they need to improve their economic situation in order to return to their country reduced the satisfaction of their husbands. In addition, those women who had a patriarchal life and had to be obedient to their husbands reported less satisfaction than other women [51]. In a review study, Chung Ray et al. (2008) investigated the trend of Southeast Asian women marrying Korean men. It was revealed that many studies have been carried out in this field, and most of them have shown that marital satisfaction in Southeast Asian women increased if they could adjust to the cultural circumstances of South Korea [50]. In Chen's study (2010) entitled "*Conflicts and marital satisfaction in international marriages in Taiwan*", 201 couples where the husbands were from Taiwan and the wives from China, Thailand, Vietnam, or Indonesia, were investigated. It was found that culture affects couples' conflicts and marital satisfaction [52]. It can be concluded that although culture alone could not impact marital conflicts, cultural similarities can definitely play an important role in the success of a marriage.

Review of studies on effective factors in marital satisfaction in Asia:

Due to the diversity of variables, not many review studies have been conducted in this field. However, two extensive studies, one investigating most of the variables in Iran and the other investigating 11 Asian countries, are discussed here.

Sorokowski et al. (2017) carried out a study on marital satisfaction by gathering data from 33 countries (including 11 Asian countries: China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and Turkey). They used two criteria to investigate marital satisfaction in couples: MRQ (Marriage and Relationships Questionnaire) and KMSS (Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale). Of the 33 countries, Saudi Arabia had the lowest and Malaysia the highest score for marital satisfaction. Asian countries, generally, had a lower mean score for their couples' satisfaction [53].

In a review study, Zaheri et al. (2016) investigated "effective factors on marital satisfaction amongst Iranian women and men". In this article, all the studies conducted from 2005 to 2015 were investigated. The results of numerous large scale studies revealed that psychological, religious, sexual and interpersonal factors, as well as relationships and interactions and mental health were effective on the couples' marital satisfaction. Furthermore, in most of the reviewed studies, the effects of some demographic factors including employment, the length of marriage, age of marriage, number of children, economic factors, and income were corroborated [5].

Discussion

In general, a review of the related literature reveals that largely under the influence of Confucianism (Confucianism is a way of life whose aim is to achieve optimal welfare and blessing for the ancestral land and to organize both the family and individual's life), which originated in China, most Asian societies underline the importance of family relationships and family values take priority over individual interests [6]. Given the strong influence of Confucius, roles vary in families leading to social expectations that husbands work outside of the family while women manage the house. Generally, husbands are expected to be the breadwinner and their spouse's housewives, and social barriers preventing the employment of married women though this situation is changing slowly [54]. On the other hand, considerable changes have taken place in the way people get married in most Asian countries in recent years. Nowadays, marriage is considered the basis for having a loving relationship and companionship in most Asian countries [55]. Therefore, expectations from marriage have changed, in particular amongst women and the presence of women in the labor market has been suggested as another aspect of marital relationships [56] in a way that even sexual relationship as an important factor has declined in importance in countries like Taiwan, Japan and South Korea, and has led to poor relationships between couples [6]. One of the serious consequences of women's presence in the labor market and the relatively undesirable conditions for employed women in East Asian societies is their very low fertility rate from 2009 on. Six East Asian countries (Macao, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan) have had the lowest fertility rates amongst the 223 countries in the world [57] in the order mentioned most probably due to the pressure in these societies to create jobs and employment for women outside the home. Another point is that divorce rates have risen in these countries [58-59]. Thus, the images that western and Asian societies present for marital satisfaction are different. In Asian countries, most men have the same traditional views, feel a responsibility to their parents and like to take care of their parents at old ages. Women in these societies are willing to enter the business or labor market while their husbands are not willing to change their traditional views. This causes dissatisfaction in women, and ultimately, dissatisfaction in the couples' relationships [60]. Therefore, it can generally be stated that one of the most important factors affecting couples' satisfaction is

gender (being male or female) of the respondent. Marital satisfaction in married Asian women is on average lower than in men. This gender gap has decreased in western societies like the United States of America (USA) [61]. However, it seems that this factor continues to be a strong factor in Asian societies. Pimentel (2000) reported that average satisfaction is higher for men compared to women in couples residing in the suburban areas of China [62]. On the other hand, based on much research, there exists a nonlinear, U-shaped relationship between stages of marital life and marital satisfaction. This U-shaped relationship has been shown in the USA and many Asian countries in several studies and means that marital satisfaction is high during the early stages of marriage, then it declines with the birth of children and after 10 to 20 years when children leave home, the couples find more opportunity to strengthen their relationship and intimacy. Thus, the level of marital satisfaction increases again in later stages [63].

Nowadays, most marriages in western societies including the USA occur based on love and attachment between couples (modern marriage), and the emergence of economic problems can not affect the satisfaction of couples. However, most marriages in Asian countries still take place in a traditional fashion [64] and socio-economic characteristics can be an important factor in the couples' dissatisfaction level. For instance, a study on South Korean couples showed that economic pressure and the consequent stress caused by it causes marital satisfaction to drop in particular in women [54].

Conclusion

In conclusion, women show less marital satisfaction than men in Asian societies, length of marriage is a U-shaped factor in marital satisfaction, socio-economic factors affect couples' marital satisfaction, and women's employment increases their dissatisfaction.

Finally, the results of the present review article and the issues raised can be useful for researchers in planning educational programs for improving couple and family satisfaction, and can be taken into account in marriage counseling.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Acknowledgments

This study was derived from a PhD thesis at the Department of Health Education and Health Promotion of Tarbiat Modares University (Tehran, Iran). The researchers hereby thank the Chancellor of the University and Vice Chancellor for Research for their support of the study.

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