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SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

Factors that influence marital intimacy: A qualitative analysis of Iranian married couples

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Abstract: Intimacy is a key factor contributing to marriage satisfaction, marriage quality, marriage stability, and marriage functioning. Despite significant attention on marital intimacy, the focus of most research has either centered on the functions of marital intimacy or aspects of the construct in marriage satisfaction. Factors that influence couple intimacy are largely overlooked. Existing studies mainly have used cross-sectional survey data. Very little exists on intimacy factors in non-western cultures. No previous research has explored intimacy through the lens of intimate couples. Therefore, this qualitative study is an attempt to investigate factors that enhance the marital intimacy of Iranian couples and introduce culture-sensitive factors. Using criterion-based purposive sampling, 14 females and males (i.e., seven intimate couples) were selected to participate in the present study, and the consensual qualitative research method was utilized to analyze data from the semi-structured interviews and personal diaries. Results demonstrated that factors enhancing marital intimacy were (i) family, (ii) shared time/length of marital relationship, (iii) reciprocity in self-sacrifice (iv) gratitude (v) new shared activity, (vi)

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

For many years, researchers have focused on the functions of marital intimacy or aspects of the construct in marriage satisfaction. However, factors that influence couple intimacy via the lens of intimate couples are overlooked. This study attempts to give voices to this group of people to understand which factors have enhanced their marital intimacy. Consequently, we selected seven intimate couples to participate in the present study, and we used a qualitative research method to analyze data we gathered from the semi-structured interviews and personal diaries. Results demonstrated that factors enhancing marital intimacy were (i) family, (ii) shared time/length of marital relationship, (iii) reciprocity in self-sacrifice (iv) gratitude (v) new shared activity, (vi) parenthood, (vii) joint social networks, and (viii) religion. Knowledge of factors that influence couple intimacy is fundamental to the development of successful pre-marital intimacy and marital therapy programs and it facilitates their effects on marital relationship.

parenthood, (vii) joint social networks, and (viii) religion. This study underlines the importance of two new factors, self-sacrifice and gratitude in Iranian collectivism culture. Using the findings, the implications for developers of marital enrichment programs, marital counselors, and clinicians are discussed.

Subjects: Education - Social Sciences; Health & Development; Cultural Studies

Keywords: Marital intimacy; qualitative analysis; iranian married couples; semi-instructed interview

1. Introduction

Divorce can be an emotional and traumatic experience that threatens the psychosocial wellbeing of couples and raises concerns for clinicians, marital therapists, and governments. The number of couples who applied for divorce has grown rapidly in different countries (Wang & Zhou, 2010). Relationships can be terminated at any point either before or after the marriage ceremony (Kalmijn, 2007). In Iran, 153 out of 1000 marriages in Iran end in divorce. This number has increased steadily (Akhavan, 2014) and places Iran as one of the countries with a high divorce rate (Aghajanian & Thompson, 2013; Akhavan, 2014). In addition to divorce, the dramatic rise in the number of unhappy Iranian couples is also a major concern (Aghajanian & Thompson, 2013).

Despite the key role of intimacy in marriage satisfaction, a thorough literature review reveals that available studies have examined the factors that influence the levels of intimacy among couples using cross-sectional survey data. Very little exists on intimacy factors in non-western cultures. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate factors that enhance the marital intimacy of Iranian couples through the lens of intimate couples and introduce culture-sensitive factors. By addressing this gap in research, the present study contributes to the theoretical and methodological knowledge on marital intimacy by exploring the views of Iranian couples concerning intimacy. As well as enhancing the empirical literature base, the findings of the present study may benefit couples, developers of marital enrichment programs, marital counselors, and clinicians.

2. Literature review

Intimacy is the primary reason people get married (Schaefer & Olson, 1981). Intimacy is also a stress-buster (Narciso & Ribeiro, 2009) and plays a fundamental role in marital functioning, commitment, stability, and psychological and physical wellbeing (Langdrige et al., 2018; Patrick et al., 2007). Given the crucial role of marital intimacy in marriage satisfaction, the absence of intimacy in marriage can be a major cause of divorce (Weinberger et al., 2008) and erode mutual trust and romance (Patrick & Beckenbach, 2009) among couples, and thereby resulting in emotional impairment/distress, isolation, marital maladjustment, and dissatisfaction (Narciso & Ribeiro, 2009). Knowledge of factors that influence couple intimacy is fundamental to the development of successful pre-marital intimacy and marital therapy programs and it facilitates their effects on marital relationship.

Earlier studies on intimacy from a psychological perspective have conceptualized intimacy as an individual or relationship attribute. Social scientists later highlighted the interpersonal and process-oriented aspects of intimacy (Lomanowska, & Guitton, 2016). Schaefer and Olson (1981) emphasize the multidimensional aspects of intimacy by focusing on the relational and interactional aspects of the intimacy process. They view intimate relationships as those “*in which an individual shares intimate experiences in several areas, and there is the expectation that the experiences and relationship will persist over time*” (p. 50). Despite differences among the definitions, most of them include self-disclosure, personal validation, trust, closeness, affection, and expression of affection (Ferreira et al., 2013). The present study conceptualizes intimacy as a dynamic process occurring between couples because they are engaged in the reciprocal feeling

of disclosing their inner self, being trusted, validated, and emotionally closed. Family systems theory highlights reciprocity and contends that the way people think, interact, and behave is influenced by the dynamics of the family system (i.e., interactions, roles, and culture) and people mutually influence the system because they are inseparable parts of such a system (Schadler, 2016). When the system encounters any transition, such as parenthood, it needs to readjust itself, modify its constitutions in response to new conditions, and reconsider existing boundaries pertaining to proximity (P. A. Cowan & Cowan, 2012).

These boundaries should be interpreted in the cultural context of marriage. The degree of permeability of boundaries to cultural change coupled with self-reflectivity shows the extent of openness of each family to changes. This can occur when each family member reflects on their behavior or modifies it (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Although family systems theory does not specifically address factors influencing couple intimacy, the theory can be used to better understand the factors. This theory has been used to explain the intimate relationships among couples (Palit, 2013). In applying the theory to the present study, the capacity for intimacy is much dependent on the context of the couple's family of origin within which their current values, behaviors, attitudes guiding intimacy have shaped. Empirical studies have demonstrated that the family shapes a person's cognitive framework concerning marital relationships and interpersonal skills, and romantic behavior (Vandeleur et al., 2009) and affects marital quality and different aspects of intimacy (Dandurand & Lafontaine, 2013). Furthermore, the effect of family on marital intimacy is greater in collectivistic cultures (Bejanyan et al., 2015).

In a family, children observe how to maintain reciprocity, togetherness in a marital relationship. Reciprocity is crucial to the equilibrium of the system (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Shared activities or shared feelings can promote intimacy by influencing reciprocity (Mackey, Diemer, & O'Brien, 2000). Women, particularly in Iranian culture, are expected to take charge of child-related tasks (Brown et al., 2017) and household chores. Women often complain about the frustration caused by their workload. Frustration is negatively associated with marital quality (Frisco & Williams, 2003), specifically intimacy (Ferreira et al., 2013).

Family systems theory highlights the needs for a balance between togetherness and individuality (Brown, 1999). Existing studies indicate that sharing time together is necessary for shaping intimacy among couples and for facilitating feelings of closeness to their spouses (Laser-Maira & Nicotera, 2019) and also sharing time together helps couples release stress (Milek et al., 2015) and facilitates communication among them (Yellig, 2011).

Religion as a separate part of culture influences marital quality by providing a guideline for life (Hünler & Gençöz, 2005). Similarities in religious orientation and background help couples to discuss their discrepancies thereby reducing marital conflict (Heller & Wood, 1998). Couples who have a religious commitment have better relationships with their spouses (Abbas et al., 2019), have a lower risk of a stressful marriage, and often are more satisfied with their marriage (Olson et al., 2015). Practicing religious activities with a spouse can enhance feelings of closeness and intimacy (Mullins, 2016). For example, Yeganeh and Shaikhmahmoodi (2013) found commitment to religious belief influences the stability of marital relationships. Couples with diverse religious backgrounds might face problems in understanding and negotiating disparities, which can either destroy or enhance marital intimacy. In Islamic societies, marriage is tied to religion because it is a sacrament ceremony in which in front of God couples vow to be committed to each other and spend their life together. This issue is of great importance because Western psychotherapy (which is based on individualism) does not appear to be useful to Islamic women (Carter & Rashidi, 2003).

Studies demonstrate that the length of marriage affects the development of intimacy among couples. Romantic relationship, love, affection develop over time (Hinchliff & Gott, 2004). Compared with newly married couples, couples who have been married for a longer period can enhance intimacy in their relationships by pursuing personal interests that can be shared later (Ferreira

et al., 2013). The length of marriage has been reported to improve different aspects of intimacy (Palit, 2013). Shared ideas and support are subject to change over time (Palit, 2013). In a recent quantitative study conducted by Kardan-Souraki et al. (2018) on 118 Iranian couples have found that duration of marriage also predicts marital intimacy for women. Time constraints caused by a busy work schedule might cause marital intimacy to decline (Ferreira et al., 2013). A number of researchers have asserted that having children limits the time spent by a couple together (Barnet-Verzat et al., 2011). Consequently, a lack of shared time may destroy the romantic relationship (Ward, 1998), provoke conflicts between the couple (Goldberg et al., 2008), and disrupt the level of intimacy (Nyström & Ohrling, 2004). Some researchers have posited that people who spend excessive time with their spouses might also experience tedium (Aron et al., 2000). However, these results have not been definitive. There are some arguments that intimacy is not strongly associated with the amount of time that couples spend together (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Self-reflectivity in family systems theory explains how family embraces change. Such a concept helps to understand how a family addresses tedium by breaking routines. Empirical studies show breaking routines is the most important factor that contributes to the enrichment of marital intimacy (Ferreira et al., 2013). Some studies suggest that such a change is facilitated by sharing novel experiences (Aron et al., 2000). Sharing activities and leisure time are the foundation of an intimate relationship (Kobra et al., 2018). Spending leisure time together might help settle marital disagreements (e.g., Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008). Similarly, networking socially with others provides couples with the opportunity to refresh and reflect on the experiences of others and obtain a comprehensive understanding of their partners by observing interactions in society thereby increasing their sense of togetherness and feelings of acceptance (Palit, 2013). Individuals are likely to express love and show commitment to their partner when members of their friendship network support the relationship (Sinclair et al., 2015). Contemporary literature also shows that the effect of networking with friends is more pronounced among women (Ferreira et al., 2013) and long-term couples (Ghalami, Saffarinia, & Shaghghi, 2013). Ferreira et al. (2013) found that having both mutual and separate friends increases the intimacy of couples. In summary, the literature demonstrates that no single factor exclusively affects marital intimacy. Several factors play a joint contributory role in promoting or inhibiting couple intimacy at any point in a relationship. This may explain the contradictory findings on the factors that enhance marital intimacy.

3. The present study

Couple intimacy has gained considerable attention in literature. A review of the psychological and educational literature shows that existing studies have tended to focus on the perception and function of marital intimacy or any aspect of this concept in marriage satisfaction (Yoo et al., 2014). Existing studies have examined the efficiency of marital intervention programs in developing intimacy (Asadpour et al., 2012). Only two previous studies have examined the factors contributing to marital intimacy in the Iranian context (JavadiVala et al., 2019; Kardan-Souraki et al., 2018). However, the published literature in international and Iranian contexts predominantly uses cross-sectional survey data. The main drawback of these studies is their failure to contextualize marital intimacy and lack of specific focus on intimacy experiences. The data have been collected from a clinical sample of couples experiencing intimacy difficulties (JavadiVala et al., 2019; Kardan-Souraki et al., 2018).

The aforementioned literature shows that existing studies on marital intimacy have also over-sampled western couples. Results from western samples may not be generalizable to couples from eastern cultures (Sadeghi et al., 2012). Different views about intimacy may be expected given the difference in cultural values between eastern and western couples (Bejanyan et al., 2015). The present authors assume that reciprocity in terms of disclosing inner self, being trusted, validated, and emotionally closed in couple relationships would be difficult to develop and maintain in the collectivistic culture of Iran. The reason is that in a collectivist culture, male headship, patriarchy, female submission to males' authority, distinct gender roles, and self-sacrifice of personal freedom for the sake of the family happiness (Nassehi-Behnam, 1985) are appreciated. Therefore, this study is an attempt to investigate factors influencing marital intimacy from intimate Iranian couples'

perspectives. To the best of our knowledge, qualitative research related to couple intimacy is lacking. A few available studies mainly have focused on the experiences of a specific group of participants, such as couples who remarried and those who were married for the first time or heterosexual couples (Jensen et al., 2014; Sandberg, 2020), or have examined the different dimensions of marital intimacy (Palit, 2013; Štulhofer et al., 2020) from different gender perspectives (Goldberg et al., 2014) at different points of time, such as six months after the birth of a child (Ahlborg & Strandmark, 2006).

Ferreira et al. (2013) are the only researchers who have investigated related factors qualitatively. Only one relevant qualitative study is available on this issue in the Iranian context. Kobra et al. (2018) examined the perceptions of Iranian couples about the dimensions of marital intimacy to see how they conceptualized this construct. However, this study suffers from two major limitations. First, this study was limited by the dominance of female's views about marital intimacy as the female participants ($n = 17$) outnumbered the male participants ($n = 3$). Second, the data were only collected through the interviews. A careful perusal of literature reviewed shows that marital intimacy has not previously been examined in a study that includes a sample of intimate nonclinical couples. The lack of generalizability, methodological limitations, and limited research capturing the perspectives of intimate couples highlight the necessity for this research.

4. Method

The present study utilized a qualitative research approach to investigate factors that influence couple intimacy. A qualitative approach investigates the issues via the lens of participants to determine how they interpret events and give them significance (Pring, 2004).

4.1. Participants and instruments

The study comprised 14 participants (i.e., seven couples) from Tehran, the capital city of Iran. The age of participants ranged from 26 years to 39 years. Flyers that included the criteria for participation and purpose of the study were distributed in different public locations, such as cafes, parks, language centers, and universities. The researchers obtained consent from the board of language centers and universities to recruit participants. Data were collected from January 2015 to March 2016.

Participants with specific characteristics were selected using criterion-based purposive sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Potential Iranian participants were screened using a checklist developed based on PAIR (Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationships) Intimacy Scale to ensure that they were in an intimate relationship with their husbands or wives and were qualified to participate in the study. Participants were asked to describe the details of intimacy in a narrative manner. The study aimed to obtain insight into couple intimacy from intimate couples who had been together for quite a long period (see Hill et al., 1997). The length of togetherness could capture fluctuations in marital intimacy. To be included in the study, the criteria mandated that (a) all participants had been married only once and were residing in Iran; (b) their length of marriage was not less than five years, and (c) they had at least one child from their marriage. Demographic information of the intimate couples is presented in Table 1.

Ethical research guidelines proposed by Constantine et al. (2005) were followed. All participants were provided with explanations concerning the purpose of the study, time framework, details of participation, and risks and incentive of the research in a consent form that the participants completed before participation. Participants were reassured about their anonymity and non-traceability. It was also emphasized that their participation was voluntary, and only the principal researcher and her research team members had access to the data.

Table 1. Demographic information of the intimate couples

No	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Number of Children	Length of Marriage (years)	Job
Couple 1	Mani	34	M	3	5	Bank Employee and university student
	Freshteh	30	F	3	5	Housewife
Couple 2	Pegah	28	F	1	5	Language teacher
	Reza	37	M	1	5	Doctor
Couple 3	Mahdi	31	M	3	6	Math teacher
	Golnaz	32	F	3	6	Auditor and university students
Couple 4	Narges	27	F	2	5	University student
	Mohammad	29	M	2	5	University student- Car designer
Couple 5	Sina	28	M	2	5	Salesperson and university student
	Elham	32	F	2	5	University student
Couple 6	Zahra	32	F	4	8	Lab technician
	Mobin	39	M	4	8	Manager of a company
Couple 7	Nazila	26	F	2	5	Jobless-Housewife
	Ali	30	M	2	5	Jeweler

4.2. Personal diary

The selected couples were requested to keep a diary of those factors that enhance their marital intimacy. The length of time for diaries was 2 weeks. According to Jacelon and Imperio (2005) diaries can reveal what events are important to the participants and reflect their attitudes. The written diaries helped us to have a deeper insight into the lived experiences of the couples.

4.3. Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Skype and each interview lasted for approximately one hour. Guidelines suggested by Hill et al. (1997) were followed in preparing the interview protocol. The interviews included both open-ended and probing questions.

The first author interviewed the participants separately from their spouse to enable them to openly share views that may have been uncomfortable expressing in the presence of their spouse. This approach was also adopted to ensure that interview validity was not affected.

Data transcripts of the interviews and diaries were mailed to the participants for verification (Patton, 2002). Peer debriefing about coding and triangulation of data through personal diaries and interviews helped us to enhance the validity of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

4.4. Role of researchers

The research team included three core members. The first author conducted all interviews to enhance consistency across interviews. The second and third authors were responsible for translating some parts of the data (including interviews and journals) that were in Persian and preparing them. The core members cooperated in transcribing the data, preparing the literature review, and analyzing and interpreting data. The whole manuscript was written by the first three authors. The fourth and fifth authors mainly guided the core members in coding and amended the early drafts. The fifth author was also an external auditor who monitored the data collection process and analysis including memos and edited the whole manuscript.

4.4.1. Method of data analysis

Consensual qualitative research (CQR) is an inductive and qualitative type of analysis, wherein a group of researchers attempt to reach a consensus regarding data analysis and its interpretation (Hill et al., 1997). In this method, the biases related to the person who analyzes the data are reduced because the data are triangulated through different perspectives. The analysis begins with intense interviews, wherein redundancies and irrelevant data are omitted. The unit of analysis is the utterances. As recommended by Chenail (2012), the researchers read and listened to the text to enable them to focus on meaning. The team members independently developed the domains and core ideas within the domains. Domains are similar to axial coding (Khan, 2014). The team compared and contrasted the domains and core ideas at coding meetings. The auditor monitored each domain and core ideas and their feedback was incorporated into the analysis before proceeding to another step. Each member coded meaning segments within each domain. Construction of categories was an interpretive process that occurred through constant comparison of meaning segments. The categories were shaped based on family systems and previous literature. The team members cross-checked the codes by referring to the data and discussing the differences of each case among themselves, as well as the possible influence of biases throughout the coding process. Finally, the team developed and finalized the domains, categories, and subcategories by cross analyzing the data. The domains, categories, and subcategories were tabulated including their quantities (see Table 2).

The term *general* (13–14 participants) means that all cases or all except one discussed the category or subcategory; *typical* (7–12 participants) means that half or more than half of the cases discussed the category or subcategory; *variant* (2–6 participants) was used when less than half of the cases discussed the categories. Findings related to single cases are not reported.

5. Results

The responses of the participants were categorized under the following domains: (i) family, (ii) shared time/length of marital relationship, (iii) reciprocity in self-sacrifice (iv) gratitude (v) new shared activity, (vi) parenthood, (vii) joint social networks, and (viii) religion. The following section presents the description of each domain including verbatim quotes.

5.1. Family

The participants emphasized the permeability of intimacy and believed that intimacy can be learned and developed through family interactions. Individuals with different family backgrounds were reported to hold different perceptions of actions that comprise intimacy. For instance, one participant reported that individuals from an emotionally distant family who witnessed “*aggression and hostility*” are likely to exhibit similar behaviors. They emphasized that individuals learn to socialize and build expectations from their partners through interactions with their parents and other family members. For instance, “*some men rarely trust women,*” whereas some expect them to “*raise and take care of children rather than deciding about other life issues.*” Some men “*look for passive, acquiescent, and compliant wives.*” Such an expectation is a key factor that affects the way individuals address the needs of their significant other.

Participants commented that the intimate behavior of their parents and siblings served as a positive or negative intimacy model. The relationships established by their parents and other family members served as the groundwork for interacting, expressing love and compromising with the spouse. An Iranian proverb states that if *a man chooses a person to marry, he should observe a woman’s mother. How does the mother behave? How does she talk to her husband? Is she content? Can she tolerate the difficulty of life?* When describing the role of parents in the intimacy behavior of participants, three participants agreed that different coping techniques enable couples to deal with their own challenges, avoid family conflicts, and maintain marital intimacy. Family in-laws were often referred by the participants as “nosey” “selfish” and “interfering” and people having a negative influence than positive on their intimacy. As reported by one of the participants,

Table 2. Frequency analysis

Table 2. Frequency analysis	
Domains, categories, subcategories	
1. Family	
a. Family interaction	General Typical
1. Intimacy can be learnt through interaction with parents and other family members	
2. Interactions within the family determine the perceptions about intimacy and expectation about an intimate spouse	
b. Family serves as an intimacy model	Typical Variant
1. Model can be used to predict the behavior in later relationship	
2. Models that parents present reflect their efficiency	
2. Shared Time and Marital Relationship Length	
a. Quantity of the shared time is fundamental to togetherness	General Typical General
b. Quality of the shared time is more important than quantity for togetherness	
c. Time needs to be allocated for togetherness	
d. Length of marriage can enhance different aspects associated to intimacy	Variant General Variant Typical
1. Self-differentiation and valuing the differences	
2. Commitment	
3. Love	
4. Scarification of personal needs	
3. Reciprocity in self sacrifice	General General
a. Reciprocity in self-sacrifice encourage self-disclosure and togetherness	
1. Unclear border between women's sacrifice and their obligation discourage women to self-disclose themselves.	Variant Variant
2. Iranian culture is more demanding and expecting woman to be more submissive to men	
3. The strength of identification with Iranian heritage culture encourages sacrifice among the couples.	
4. Gratitude	General General Variant
a. Gratitude is essential element fostering communication among couples.	
1. Gratitude is barely practiced by Iranian Men as it is a stigma in patriarchal culture.	
2. The culture of gratitude to women need to be fostered	
3. New Shared Activity	General
a. Changing the monotonous routines by involving in a new shared activity or leisure activity is vital to intimacy.	
1. Activity does not need to be an extraordinary	
4. Parenthood	Typical Typical Typical
a. Children encourage cooperation and support in different activities and critical periods of time	
1. Decisions about the children's lives and education.	
2. Division of labor	
3. Supporting each other emotionally	
b. Children stabilize the spouse relationship	Variant General Typical General
1. Discovering about the self and the spouse	
2. Increasing commitment, family cohesion	
3. Decreasing relational conflict	
4. Encouraging self-sacrifice	
c. Children cause relational conflict and anxiety	Variant Variant Variant
1. Increasing financial distresses, arguments over rearing, and nurturing the children	
d. Children affect shared time	Typical Typical Variant
1. Limiting time for being together and communicate	
2. Encouraging the parents to spend more time together	
e. Children negatively affect proximity and energy	
1. lack of physical or emotional attendance to each other	
a. More frustration for women due to child-associated tasks	
2. lack of the sexual engagement	
5. Joint Social Networks	General Typical Typical Variant
a. Common friends have positive impact on the marital relationship and intimacy	
1. Enhancing Well-being	
2. Providing an enjoyable experience	
3. Improving life associated skills and incorporate experience to life	
a. Lack of opportunity to learn the skills in some Iranian families	
b. Individual friends have negative impact on the marital relationship and intimacy	General Typical Typical
1. Decreasing sense of togetherness	
a. Wasting the time and energy of husband or wife	
2. Causing relational conflict	
a. Causing anxiety and depression	
b. Affect the opinion of husband or wife	

(Continued)

Domains, categories, subcategories	
6. Religion a. Religion facilitates communication between the couples b. Religious commitment is associated different aspects of intimacy 1. Increasing marital adjustment 2. Limiting any romantic relationships which were outside of religious norms 3. Encouraging couple's responsibility to change for a better person 4. Encouraging couples to decrease their conflict 5. Religious men preserve and support the family	Typical General General Typical Variant General

conflicts occurred between her and her husband as her family in-laws had tried to solve their problems by guiding them on what to do. Moreover, the presence of the family in-laws provoked anxiety between her and her husband because they were concerned about the negative evaluation of themselves by her husband's family members.

5.2. Shared time and length of marital relationship

The interviewees argued that developing an intimate relationship requires time. The participants agreed that the amount of time couples spent together significantly influences their level of intimacy. However, nine participants stated that an opportunity to share feelings and strengthen the sense of togetherness and belonging is more important than the amount of time itself. The participants considered this sense of belonging as a key to settle conflicts or change distorted perceptions about their feelings. All participants indicated that they devoted time to their spouses and continually negotiated problems to enrich intimacy. For instance, one participant stated that when he and his wife were working, their time was filled with duties and responsibilities at work and they had no time for communication and intimacy:

“Both of us were working full-time. On weekdays, we were working, working, and working intensively. We had no time for each other during the week. On weekends, I had to handle backlog at work, and I used to promise my wife that we would discuss matters later if time permitted”

An intimate relationship within marriage was subject to changes because of the length of the marital relationship. Some stated that they could enhance self-differentiation over time and they could understand how their partners differed from them to value their differences. This approach allowed them to arrive at a reasonable compromise, strengthen their support to each other, fix their problems, and act thoughtfully. Thirteen participants highlighted that couples increase their commitment to a marital relationship over time because the length of time spent in a relationship brings a kind of “obligation” and “attachment.” Time was reported to help couples learn how to sacrifice their personal needs and to maintain their relationship. Only three participants said that love increased over time.

5.3. Reciprocity in self-sacrifice

Most of these participants acknowledged that enhancing intimacy is more a matter of responding to and fulfilling obligations determined by culture. Highlighting this issue, some elaborated that in Iranian culture a self-sacrificed woman or a man is synonymous with an intimate wife or husband. For instance: *“If you are intimate, you should be ready to do anything, you should devote your soul, yourself.”* One of the female participants stated: *“My culture reinforces this idea that women who are devoted mothers and wives are more intimate in eyes of their Iranian husbands.”*

The strength of identification with Iranian heritage culture encouraged males and females to fulfil the obligations and sacrifice for the family. Female participants complained that Iranian culture is more demanding and women are expected to be more submissive to men. Participants believed

that reciprocity in self-sacrifice motivates the couples to get engaged in self-disclosure and spend more time together. However, seven participants admitted that sharing inner self with Iranian husbands is difficult as the border between women's sacrifice and their obligation is quite blurred. In other words, what Iranian women interpret as self-sacrifice is interpreted as women's obligations by men.

"Iranian men think that washing the dishes, cleaning the house and raising a baby is women's duty. They don't understand women can spend time on themselves and their interests what they do is scarifying their personal needs, time, and interest for the family."

5.4. Gratitude

Five females and six males highlighted gratitude is an essential element of intimate relationships. They highlighted that feeling appreciated for their efforts in fulfilling an obligation can enhance communication among couples as they feel they are valued. Most of the participants complained that Iranian husbands do not appreciate their wives' efforts as it is a stigma in Iranian patriarchal culture. For instance: *"In Iranian culture, it is not acceptable if men thank their wives for what she does, it is because men don't want to show that they are submissive to their wives. That might threaten their power."* Some highlighted the culture of gratitude to women needs to be fostered because without gratitude marriage would suffer.

5.5. New shared activity

During the interview participants reported that a degree of monotony occurs after some time, which may jeopardize the healthy condition of marriage and threaten marital intimacy. They maintained that changes in monotonous routines and involvement in new shared activities, specifically new leisure activities, were vital to intimacy. One participant stated: *"After a while, you will see that you are trapped in a loop and everything is repetitive. You need to start something new, such as a new simple activity."*

Majority added that such an activity can be as simple as *"doing regular exercise"*, *"participating in celebrations and special events"*, *"cooking"*, *"travelling or taking leisurely walk"*, and *"taking a trip"*.

5.6. Parenthood

Participants reported different positive and negative experiences regarding parenthood. The interviewees admitted that child-associated tasks required resilience, time, and energy. The lack of these attributes impacted on intimacy. Children appeared to encourage cooperation and support between couples in different activities during critical periods. Majority viewed parenthood as a rewarding experience. These participants stated that parenthood encouraged joint involvement in education and decisions about the lives of the children. One female participant said: *"We sit and talk about our plans for our kids, including the school to which we are going to send them and the skills we expect our kids to learn."*

Parenthood provided some with an opportunity to learn how to divide the labor, whereas it encouraged others to stand with each other during stressful times. The participants noted how children stabilize the relationship between spouses and strengthen their intimacy. Three participants mentioned that parenthood helped them know better about themselves and their spouses. One female participant added that such knowledge is vital *"to evaluate the abilities of each other and avoid pushing someone more than his/her ability."* All participants reported that having a child could increase *"marital commitment," "family cohesion,"* and that self-sacrifice leads to intimacy. Participants also added that kids decreased relational conflict. One male participant noted: *"We do not fight or argue because of the kids or at least we do not argue when the kids are around."* While less than half also argued that having children encouraged them to communicate and spend more time together, six commented that their time together and their communication was limited because the children were the focus of their attention and topic of discussion.

The data showed that some participants harbor negative feelings about paternity when they had their first child. Paternity was a threat to marital intimacy because children were the source of relational conflict and anxiety. Four participants commented that financial distress, arguments over child-rearing and nurturing children always resulted in the loss of intimacy. Almost half indicated that children negatively affected proximity and energy. According to these participants, parenthood may result in the lack of physical (e.g., sexual engagement) or emotional attendance to each other and dearth of privacy. For instance:

“All conversations are about the children instead of about our dreams, achievements, struggles, hopes, and even future plans. My sense of privacy decreased and, of course, sexual activity.”

The negative effect of children on intimacy was more pronounced in women than in men. Seven female participants commented that parenthood disturbs intimacy because the involvement of their spouses in childcare and tasks are not significant. For instance:

“I was the one who was in direct contact with the child 24 hours. I took my son to the doctor when he was sick or played with him when he was bored.”

Despite these negative perceptions, all female participants later added that Iranian mothers sacrifice their time and energy to guarantee the security and wellbeing of their children.

5.7. Joint social networks

The interviews indicated that networking socially plays a significant role in couple intimacy. Interaction with mutual friends rather than individual ones enhanced intimate relationships. All participants highlighted the influence of mutual friends on their psychological wellbeing. For instance, one participant mentioned that *“being with others, I mean friends that we share, is necessary for our mental health.”* Twelve participants stated that the company of mutual friends was an enjoyable experience.

Eleven participants explained that interactions with common friends provided them with considerable opportunities to develop life skills, such as *“cooperation,” “support,”* and *“mutual self-sacrifice.”* Such interactions also enabled them to incorporate the experience of their friends into their daily lives. According to three participants, such opportunities were *“absent”* in the relationship of their parents because they were often *“in control”* and *“rarely view[ed] children as friends.”* Some of the participants commented on the negative effects of individual friends on their partners. All participants assumed that individual friends decreased togetherness because they claimed that the time and energy of their spouses would be spent with friends. Some feared that individual friends caused relational conflicts. Seven commented that distress from interaction with individual friends was likely to *“be transferred to their house”* and affect their own intimacy. Eight participants believed that individual friends often affected the opinion of their spouse about their husbands or wives and destroyed marital intimacy.

5.8. Religion

According to participants, religion facilitated communication among couples. Religious affiliations and religious commitments are associated with intimacy. Thirteen participants stated that religious commitment contributed to marital adjustment. For instance, one male participant stated: *“when you are religiously committed, you can easily accept the reality about marital life and adapt yourself to it.”* All participants believed that religious commitment could limit any romantic relationships outside of religious norms, thereby increasing trust between the couple. Eleven participants commented that religion increased the responsibility of the couples to improve themselves. Less than half commented that religious commitment encouraged couples to avoid conflicts or repair the relationship after a breakup. All seven female participants concurred that religious men preserved and supported the family at any cost thereby sustaining an intimate relationship.

6. Discussion

The present exploratory study is the first attempt that draws upon the family theory to investigate the factors influencing couple intimacy. This study contributes to family theory because it examines the intimacy factors via the lens of the members in the family system. In addition, the study methodologically extends previous work on this area by giving voices to the invisible intimate Iranian couples. The findings underline the importance of two new factors, self-sacrifice, and gratitude, in enhancing the intimacy among Iranian couples. The results from this study indicated that in Iranian collectivism culture, couple intimacy is enhanced when males and females fulfill their obligations and are willing to sacrifice.

Males and females argued that those who identify more strongly with Iranian culture were more willing to sacrifice themselves for the family. Female participants complained that Iranian culture is demanding and women are expected to be more submissive. Most of the participants argued that reciprocity in self-sacrifice can enhance self-disclosure and togetherness. Contrary to results in the present study, Ferreira et al. (2013) found that in Western countries the recognition of needs rather than sacrifice fosters the intimacy among the couples.

Most of the participants believed that expressing gratitude to their spouse can enhance communication. However, they perceived that gratitude as a stigma in Iranian culture threatens Iranian men's authority and discourages them to appreciate their wives for what they do. This could be related to the collectivist culture of Iran in which females are expected to submit to males' authority (Nassehi-Behnam, 1985). Some highlighted that it is time to foster the culture of gratitude toward women since without gratitude marriage would suffer. This shows that the family system in Iran is welcoming new behaviour and open to some changes. Similarly, Kardan-Souraki et al. (2018) found couples with higher marital intimacy share their feelings with their spouses.

The results also show that intimacy experiences are constructed within the social-cultural settings of a family. Relationships among family members are important in developing intimacy. In fact, intimacy is learned by observing parent behaviour and by establishing relationships with parents and family members. The findings in the present study are consistent with previous studies (Dandurand & Lafontaine, 2013).

The participants agreed that marital intimacy occurs once partners experience togetherness. They added that togetherness requires spending and allocating time for working with the partner to develop intimacy. Previous studies have shown that sharing time together enhances closeness (Kobra et al., 2018; Laser-Maira & Nicotera, 2019; Milek et al., 2015). However, time constraints reduce marital intimacy (Ferreira et al., 2013). Apart from shared time, participants argued that the length of marriage can help couples enrich marital intimacy. Spending time together enables couples to acquire knowledge about themselves and their spouse thereby allowing them to develop love, commitment, and sacrifice personal needs if needed. The importance of the length of marriage as a factor enhancing intimacy was consistent with previous studies (Kardan-Souraki et al., 2018; Palit, 2013).

Consistent with Ferreira et al. (2013) who identified the negative effect of monotony on marital intimacy, the participants in the present study underlined the importance of engaging in new shared activities. In line with this finding, Kobra et al. (2018) found that sharing activities is a key element of intimacy. Participants emphasized that new shared activity does not need to be extraordinary. Both genders emphasized the role of new shared activity in developing an intimate relationship. The present finding is inconsistent with findings in previous studies (Shenkman, 2018) which highlighted that men prioritize shared activity in an intimate relationship, whereas women emphasize shared emotions.

Participants in the present study added that transition to parenthood enhances their level of intimacy. Family system theory contends that any transition disturbs the equilibrium of a family.

A family needs to readjust itself according to changes and modify its constitutions in response to new conditions and reconsider existing boundaries (Cowan & Cowan, 2012; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Some participants reported that some aspects of parenthood (e.g., cooperation between the couple) strengthen their marital relationship and reinforced intimacy (Palit, 2013). Other studies have argued that having children limited the time spent by couples together (Barnet-Verzat et al., 2011), caused relational conflict between couples (Goldberg et al., 2008), and disturbed intimacy (Nyström & Ohrling, 2004). Compared to men, women felt more frustrated about parenthood, which negatively affected marital intimacy. Similar to previous research (Grote & Clark, 2001), orientation to traditional gender roles was reported by some participants in the present study. However, some changes were observed in the perception of Iranian males regarding gender roles. Such differences can be explained by the degree of permeability of boundaries to cultural change and the idea of self-reflectivity. Self-reflectivity posits that the system or each family member can examine their own behavior.

The participants in the present study proposed that networking socially with friends contributes to intimate relationships. Intersectionality in the theoretical framework of family systems shows how networking as a factor can influence family systems (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). The results of the present study are consistent with those obtained by other researchers (Ferreira et al., 2013). In contrast to the findings of the present study, other research has reported no difference between the effects of mutual and separate friends on marital intimacy (Ferreira et al., 2013). Mutual friends increase marital intimacy, whereas having separate friends decreases it.

Moreover, the study found that religion, which is a component of social life (particularly in Iran), can positively contribute to the intimacy of Iranian couples. The participants confirmed that religious commitment facilitates communication among couples. Participants reported that those with strong religious commitment are likely to formulate good adjustment, limit romantic relationships outside of the religious norms, attempt to become a good person, and decrease conflict. Female participants reported that religious men support the family by sustaining intimacy. This finding is consistent with previous studies (Abbas et al., 2019; Yeganeh & Shaikhmahmoodi, 2013).

7. Limitations and area for future research

This study has some limitations. The size of the study sample was small but consistent with CQR parameters (Hill et al., 1997). The samples just included heterosexual couples rather than homosexual, bisexual, and transgender couples and a number of them were university students. The couples were selected from Tehran, couples from other geographic regions with different educational backgrounds may have different experiences of intimacy. Furthermore, data collected from both partners of couples were not analyzed separately. Future studies need to collect data from diverse samples of different ages in different geographical regions. Another limitation of this study was the information collected was based on self-report data such as interviews and personal journals. Findings from other data sources (e.g., observational studies) might reveal different types of information.

8. Implications of the study

Despite the above-mentioned limitations, this study offers robust findings concerning couple intimacy which are applicable to other contexts. The results of this study could be used in pre-marital workshops to inform couples about the different aspects of intimacy and some existing challenges faced by Iranian couples. Given that couple therapy has been effective in increasing intimacy (Brooks et al., 2001), the findings presented in this study may help therapists design different intervention programs to enhance the level of intimacy of their clients through, shared leisure activities, parenthood, and gratitude. In order to remediate Iranian male negative attitude toward gratitude to wives, clinical interventions should target cultural stigma.

The findings of the present study may also enhance the cultural competence of therapists working with Iranian couples. Therapists or counsellors could use the findings of the present study to better calibrate services to Iranian couple's needs. They could also develop culturally congruent protocols to promote intimacy. In developing such a protocol, religion an inseparable part of Iranian life influencing their relationships should be emphasized (Carter & Rashidi, 2003).

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Appendix A

Date	Event	My reflection

The purpose of the diary is to inform the researchers about your daily activities and about the factor that enhance the intimacy between you and your spouse. Please spend at least three days a week writing your personal diary.

Personal diary

Appendix B Interview Protocol

1. How do you know that you are an intimate couple?
2. When do you and your spouse feel intimate?
3. When do you and your spouse partner involve in self disclosure?
4. How do you and your spouse grow intimacy?
5. Do you feel the level of intimacy in your early marriage is different from now? How and why?
6. Have you felt your partner withhold intimacy? Why? What you do?

Probing Questions:

1. Can you more explain about self-disclosure?

2. Why do you think intimacy is a process?
3. Can you explain more how family contributes to couple intimacy?
4. Can you explain how common and individual friend of husband or wife may affect couple intimacy?
5. How do you think culture has affected Iranian understanding of intimacy?



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