

Factors Influencing Relationship Disengagement in Married Couples: A Qualitative Study

Faezeh Salayani¹, Mohammad Javad Asghari Ebrahimabad^{2*}, Mohammad Ali Besharat³, Behrooz Mahram⁴, Sakineh Soltani Kouhbanani⁵

¹Faculty of Education and Psychology, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran

²Department of Psychology, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran

³Department of Psychology, Faculty of Psychology and Education, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran

⁴Department of Curriculum Studies and Instruction, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran

⁵Department of Education and Counseling Psychology, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran

*Corresponding Author: Mohammad Javad Asghari Ebrahimabad, Email: Mjasghari@um.ac.ir

Abstract

Background: Relationship disengagement is one of the most common reasons reported by couples when explaining the distress and dissolution of the marriage. The present study aimed to investigate the factors affecting relationship disengagement in Iranian couples.

Methods: This qualitative study was conducted using the conventional content analysis approach. The participants were 24 Iranian married couples (in Mashhad) who were selected using non-random and purposive sampling. The data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with the couples and the interviews continued until data saturation. The collected data were analyzed using Graneheim and Lundman's qualitative content analysis method.

Results: Data analysis revealed three themes (each with some categories): (1) Interpersonal factors (problems related to the family of origin, conflict in couple interactions, distancing behaviors, and ineffective spouse selection), (2) individual-personality factors (emotional instability and character traits), and (3) socioeconomic factors (financial and vocational issues and perceived fairness and inequality).

Conclusion: The findings indicated that marital relationship disengagement leads to emotional apathy and dissolution of marital relationships. Couples therapy approaches should target the causes of relationship disengagement to increase the quality of couples' relationships and prevent divorce. The insights from this study can be used for formulating treatment and preventive approaches to prevent couple relationship disengagement.

Keywords: Couples, Disaffection, Relationship disengagement, Qualitative study

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Introduction

Marriage can be considered one of the most important and stable interpersonal relationships. Research has generally shown that married people enjoy better physical and mental health than their unmarried counterparts (1). People often establish romantic relationships with each other and expect this relationship to last forever and try to remain satisfied with their marriage, but people and circumstances change over time (2). Marital relationships play an important role in shaping health-promoting behaviors and lifestyle changes over time (3). At the same time, alarming evidence and data also show the prevalence of marital discord around the world (2). The data showed that the ratio of divorce to marriage in

Iran in 2004 was 21.10, which increased to 58.22 in 2014, showing a growing trend during ten years (4).

Relationship disengagement is one of the most common reasons reported by couples when explaining the distress and dissolution of marriage. It is also one of the most common problems in therapy sessions (5). The definition or conceptualization of relationship disengagement is complicated because researchers have highlighted its different aspects in their various studies. Barry et al. conceptualized relationship disengagement as a distinct construct that includes emotional, cognitive, and behavioral components (5). The emotional aspects of relationship disengagement involve marital disaffection, emotional disengagement, and apathy (6).



One of the emotional components of disengagement is marital disaffection proposed by Kayser (7). Marital disaffection indicates a gradual loss of emotional attachment, a decrease in care and attention, and an increase in apathy and indifference towards the life partner. Emotional disengagement is also the process of increasing indifference and withdrawal, decreasing the feeling of love, and lack of emotional attachment towards the couple over time, and it can be observed in behavioral, cognitive, and emotional components (8). The next component of disengagement is emotional apathy. During a marriage, apathy means the lack of interaction or withdrawal from marital relations (9). Moreover, relationship disengagement involves cognitive and behavioral components derived from Hess's studies; cognitions and behaviors that are used to increase physical or psychological distance from the spouse (5,10). Although couples usually seek couple therapy for various reasons, couple therapists find it very challenging to help separated couples resolve their conflicts and increase intimacy and positive feelings between them (11).

Numerous studies have addressed the concept of relationship disengagement, and most of these studies have been retrospective. They have also addressed people who have experienced disengagement in the past and are now getting divorced. Retrospective research on the personal and communication history of people is not very reliable (12). Besides, a review of the literature shows that all of these studies were descriptive and no study has qualitatively examined the factors affecting relationship disengagement. The present study is the first study to explore the concept of relationship disengagement through interviews with couples who are currently experiencing relationship disengagement.

It should be noted that in this study, the interviews were conducted with disengaged married couples which helps to develop a theoretical framework related to the concept of relationship disengagement in Iran. The proposed framework accounts for the factors affecting relationship disengagement in Iranian couples. The results of the interviews were summarized and coded using content analysis, and the final themes were identified. The findings of this study provide comprehensive information and knowledge to researchers and couple therapists to make more informed decisions about the factors that play a more effective role in the occurrence of marital relationship disengagement and design effective therapy interventions. A look at the literature also shows that the concept of marital relationship disengagement is still one of the issues of interest for researchers in the field of couple and family therapy (13). Distress in romantic relationships can have a significant negative impact on a person's physical and mental health, potentially causing problems such as substance abuse, cardiovascular and immune system diseases, and depression. To this end,

the present study aimed to investigate factors affecting relationship disengagement among Iranian married couples.

Methods

The present study reports the results of the first phase of a mixed-method study that examined relationship disengagement in Iranian couples. In this phase of the study, a conventional qualitative content analysis method was performed to explore the perceptions of the participants about the causes of their relationship disengagement. The participants were couples living in Mashhad (Iran) who had visited psychological service and counseling centers in Mashhad from May to August 2022. The participants were selected using convenience and purposive sampling from among the couples who scored high in relationship disengagement. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. The participants were 24 married people (12 couples). The inclusion criteria were couples who were both over 18 years old, at least one year had passed since their marriage and were willing to participate and cooperate in the interview session. The exclusion criteria were unwillingness to attend the interview session, one of the partners not willing to take the interview, refraining from providing information in the interview session, having a history of drug addiction and abuse, having acute psychological symptoms, and applying for divorce. The interviews with the couples were conducted in private spaces in the counseling center and the interviews continued until the data were saturated and no new information was obtained ($n = 24$).

The participants gave written informed consent and attended face-to-face interviews. A total of 30 married individuals were invited to participate in the study; 6 persons (20%) did not meet the inclusion criteria and were excluded from the study. Finally, 24 married individuals remained as participants in the study. After obtaining the required permits, some written and verbal instructions were provided to the participants about the research procedure. Besides, informed consent was obtained from all participants. The participants were free to leave the study at any time without providing any reason. The participants' information was also kept confidential. The participants' names were coded and all interviews were recorded. The researcher had no role in the couple therapy sessions conducted for the participants.

The data in this study were collected via 24 in-depth semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. Each interview lasted 60 minutes. Each couple was interviewed independently by an interviewer who held a Ph.D. degree in Counselling – Family Therapy. The interviewed couples had never met the researcher before. Before starting the study, the counselor communicated with the participants and explained the objectives of the

study. The members of the research team monitored her every two weeks. The interview guide contained several open-ended questions to explore the couples' opinions about the causes of relationship disengagement. The participants were asked what context or situational factors influenced their marital relationship disengagement and they were encouraged to discuss these factors. Each participant actively participated in the interview and talked about their relationship history and reasons for their relationship disengagement. The main questions asked in the interviews were: "Would you please talk about your current life and what you are unhappy about?" and "What factors do you think caused your disengagement with your spouse?"

The collected data were analyzed using the conventional content analysis method following Graneheim and Lundman's instructions (14). The trustworthiness of the data was checked using the criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln, including credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (15). Accordingly, the researcher listened to the audiotapes and read the manuscripts of the interviews repeatedly to identify emerging themes. To ensure the confirmability of the findings, the researcher produced the initial codes and two raters independently coded the transcripts. The inter-rater agreement was 89%, confirming the credibility of the data. The entire dataset was converted into clusters of codes. Then, the codes were classified into possible themes. Afterward, the extracted themes were examined, defined, and named, and further subcategorized. In the next step, the coherence and connection between the themes were checked. The dependability of data and findings was assessed following the consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ) (16).

Results

The participants in this study were 24 married couples who attended the interview session. The average age of the participants was 28.92 ± 8.33 years with an age range of 18-45 years. Table 1 shows the participants' demographic characteristics.

Data analysis revealed three main themes (each with some categories): (a) Interpersonal factors (problems related to the family of origin, conflict in couple interactions, distancing behaviors, and ineffective spouse selection), (b) individual-personality factors (emotional instability and character traits), and (c) socioeconomic factors (financial and vocational issues and perceived fairness and inequality) (Table 2).

In the first phase of the study, 24 open codes were extracted and clustered into three main categories and 8 themes: problems related to the family of origin, conflict in couple interactions, distancing behaviors, ineffective spouse selection, emotional instability, character traits, financial and vocational issues, and perceived

fairness and inequality. To comply with the principle of confidentiality, numbers were used instead of the real names of the participants (Table 1).

Interpersonal factors

The analysis of the data indicated that interpersonal factors including problems related to the family of origin, conflict in couple interactions, distancing behaviors, and ineffective spouse selection can affect relationship disengagement in married couples.

Problems related to the family of origin

The parenting style of the family of origin affects the behavior of the children. The way parents communicate with their children and to what extent children can establish intimate relationships with their parents affects the mental health and interpersonal relationships of people in adulthood. Problems related to the family of origin identified in this study through interviews with the couples describe how unpleasant experiences with the family of origin affect marital relationships. These problems include dysfunctional parenting, parental conflict and divorce, and family interference in marriage.

1. Dysfunctional parenting

The participants in this study indicated that they either had controlling parents with high and strict expectations or parents who were cold, inattentive, and neglectful, and they could not forgive their parents for the way they treated them. For example, a female participant with an authoritarian mother described her experience as follows: "My mother controlled everything and I had to do what she asked. I couldn't do whatever I wanted and I had to do things that she wished. Otherwise, she would yell at me. I also gave in and did whatever she asked of me" (Participant 1).

2. Parental conflict and divorce

The participants in this study stated that they had experienced a stressful situation between their parents, divorce, and addiction, as well as psychological distress in their parents, which affected their relationship with their spouses. Some participants reported that they had witnessed their father's addiction during childhood and their fathers used drugs in the presence of their children. Several participants also stated their parents were divorced in the past or died in the past, and this had a terrible effect on their psyche and in their marital life, especially on their relationship with their spouses. One of the male participants, whose father used drugs, described his family situation as follows: "My mother was always against my father's drug use. They were always arguing about it, and my father beat my mother. Then my mother would get angry and go to her father's house for several days or months" (Participant 4).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Participant's code	Gender	Age	Educational level	Employment status	Number of children	Duration of marriage (year)
Participant 1	Female	20	Bachelor's degree	Housewife	0	1
Participant 2	Male	23	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	0	1
Participant 3	Female	21	Bachelor's degree	Housewife	0	5
Participant 4	Male	26	Master's degree	Employed	0	5
Participant 5	Female	28	Master's degree	Housewife	1	10
Participant 6	Male	38	Bachelor's degree	Employed	1	10
Participant 7	Female	18	Diploma	Housewife	0	1
Participant 8	Male	23	Diploma	Employed	0	1
Participant 9	Female	30	Diploma	Employed	2	13
Participant 10	Male	36	Associate Degree	Employed	2	13
Participant 11	Female	25	Associate Degree	Housewife	1	4
Participant 12	Male	29	Bachelor's degree	Employed	1	4
Participant 13	Female	42	Master's degree	Housewife	1	21
Participant 14	Male	42	Master's degree	Employed	1	21
Participant 15	Female	19	Diploma	Housewife	0	1
Participant 16	Male	22	Diploma	Employed	0	1
Participant 17	Female	24	Bachelor's degree	Housewife	1	5
Participant 18	Male	33	Master's degree	Employed	1	5
Participant 19	Female	35	Bachelor's degree	Employed	1	15
Participant 20	Male	40	Bachelor's degree	Employed	1	15
Participant 21	Female	38	Master's degree	Employed	2	12
Participant 22	Male	45	Bachelor's degree	Employed	2	12
Participant 23	Female	19	Bachelor's degree	Housewife	0	1
Participant 24	Male	23	Associate Degree	Employed	0	1

3. Family interference in marriage

The participants stated that one of the important issues that worsened their marital relationship was the interference of their families and surrounding people, especially the spouse's family. The participants reported that they shared their issues and problems with their parents, and this made the parents angry, leading to their interference in their children's lives. The participants reported that their parents gave them suggestions to apply in their lives, which caused the relationship to deteriorate. One male participant described the impact of his wife's family interference as follows: *"My wife doesn't like her parents calling all the time. Her family keeps calling, and my wife herself is feeling sick. I'm getting sick too. I know there is someone who is controlling our lives. Her family members are always checking our personal affairs. My wife's parents always ask me how I treat my wife and if I beat her or let her go out"* (Participant 4).

Conflict in couple interactions

The participants stated that they could not talk about their tension and conflict with their spouses because they did not know how to talk about their problems without leading to fights and anger between them. In most cases, they decided to refrain from talking about issues and

concerns that offend them and stay silent. Data analysis showed that communication has an effective role in the intimacy and satisfaction of couples. The results also indicated conflicting relationships were caused by poor communication and negative communication beliefs.

1. Poor communication

The participants stated that poor marital skills, especially communication skills, were one of the factors leading to relationship disengagement. They also attributed relationship disengagement to the inability to talk to each other, lack of knowledge of how to resolve conflicts, and lack of mutual understanding between couples. The participants stated that they had many conflicts and disagreements and they could not resolve them. Failure to resolve disagreements leads to more problems and conflicts and decreased intimacy. One female participant stated, *"My husband did nothing for our life. He did not love me. When I talk to him, he is silent and doesn't say anything at all which makes me angry. My husband doesn't care about me at all"* (Participant 9).

2. Negative communication beliefs

The participants in this study suggested that having irrational beliefs about their spouses and their

Table 2. Subcategories, categories, and main themes of factors influencing relationship disengagement

Main themes	Categories	Subcategories	
Interpersonal factors	Problems related to the family of origin	Dysfunctional parenting	
		Parental conflict and divorce	
		Family interference in marriage	
	Conflict in couple interactions	Poor communication	
		Negative communication beliefs	
		Aggressive behaviors	
	Distancing behaviors	Unmet expectations	
		Sexual problems	
		Low empathy and support	
		Poor commitment	
Ineffective spouse selection	The spouse’s low religiosity		
	Forced and unexpected marriage		
Individual – personality factors	Emotional instability	Differences in values, personality, and socioeconomic status	
		Low self-confidence and depression	
		Adverse childhood experiences (trauma)	
		Social media addiction	
		Drug abuse	
	Character traits	Low compatibility	
		Low emotional expression	
		Unwillingness to forgive	
		Socioeconomic factors	Financial and vocational issues
			Low income and unemployment
Job stress			
Perceived fairness and inequality	Unequal power distribution		
	Failure in joint parenting		

characteristics was one of the issues affecting their marital relationships. The participants reported that they had illogical beliefs about their relationship with their spouses and had negative attitudes toward issues and problems related to themselves and their relationship. They also provided negative explanations for their spouse’s behavior and interpreted their behavior in a negative way, which led to the escalation of conflicts. One of the male participants described his negative and stressful thoughts and beliefs about his wife: *“When my wife is angry, I feel anxious and stressed. I want to resolve the tension because I am afraid of divorce. I try to do everything to reduce her anger and reconcile because I’m always thinking about divorce”* (Participant 16).

Distancing behaviors

Distancing behaviors are coping styles or strategies and refer to a set of behavioral and cognitive responses and reactions that aim to reduce the pressure of the situation and stressful events in an individual. The type of coping style affects marital relationships. Distancing behaviors include aggressive behaviors, unmet expectations,

sexual problems, low empathy and support, and poor commitment.

1. Aggressive behaviors

Physical and verbal aggression and domestic violence were among the problems reported by the participants. The participants stated that during arguments and conflicts, their spouses got very angry and beat them, or this issue happened reciprocally and both the husband and wife engaged in physical fights with each other. One of the male participants stated, *“My wife has bad language and she offends others right away. When there is an argument, she cannot bear it, heats the ceiling, and starts behaving crazily. She also screams, curses, and expresses her frustration and hits me, and I have to defend myself somehow”* (Participant 4).

2. Unmet expectations

Failure to meet expectations during marriage is one of the problems that worsens the relationship between husband and wife. The participants in this study stated that they have distanced themselves over time and their wishes and expectations are ignored or not met by their partners. At the time of marriage, spouses have expectations from their partners, which, if they are not met, will disturb the marital relationship. The degree to which the spouses’ expectations are fulfilled in the relationship determines the quality of the relationship, and the extent to which the marital expectations do not match reality causes emotional apathy and relationship disengagement in the couple. One of the male participants, whose needs were not met by his wife since the beginning of their marriage, stated, *“I can get along with life problems, but my wife can’t get along with life pressures. To be honest, I feel that I don’t love her as much as before. I hate her appearance and clothing”* (Participant 18).

3. Sexual problems

Most of the participants stated that they could not talk about their sexual needs with their partners. Some participants also said they did not agree about sex with their partner, and two couples reported they did not have sex. Some participants reported that they have sexual dysfunction but cannot talk about it with anyone. They also had anxiety-provoking preoccupations and did not enjoy their sex. One female participant stated, *“We rarely have sex because my husband’s libido is low. I became very cold because of his anger and he’s not attractive to me anymore. Now we don’t sleep together. When he’s cold, I’m cold too. I don’t want a relationship. I don’t care about that. We both didn’t want to have sex, so we left it off”* (Participant 5).

4. Low empathy and support

One of the major factors influencing relationship

disengagement is perceived negative support and lack of empathy. At the time of marriage, spouses have supportive expectations from their partners and want them to show more empathy in their relationship. They want their spouse to pay attention to what they say. One participant stated, *“My husband does not support me against his family. My mother-in-law or my sister-in-law say things to me that make me very angry, and I expect him to defend me at that moment and blame her mother and sister, but he remains silent and does not say anything”* (Participant 11).

5. Poor commitment

Some participants attributed relationship disengagement to their spouses' deception, lies, and infidelity. Some participants stated that their distance and apathy were caused by their inability to forgive their spouse's infidelity. One of the participants stated, *“My husband did not care about me, while there was a male employee at my workplace who was very attentive to me and cared about me. I liked this feeling very much and I was in regular contact with that man and we talked until my husband found out about our affairs”* (Participant 9).

Ineffective spouse selection

One of the most common reasons for relationship disengagement reported by the participants was ineffective spouse selection. The participants stated that they were looking for the wrong criteria such as beauty, money, etc. in their future spouse. Selecting the right person as the spouse ensures marital satisfaction. Selecting the wrong spouse will make the marital relationship worse because there will be a higher possibility of lack of love and affection in the relationship and one or both spouses will lose their hope in life. Ineffective spouse selection involves the spouse's low religiosity, forced and unexpected marriage, and differences in values, personality, and socioeconomic status.

1. The spouse's low religiosity

Having religious differences and gaps in couples is also one of the factors that causes marital conflicts and dissatisfaction between couples. Some participants stated that they differed from their partners in terms of their religious views and belief in religious rituals and ceremonies, and when they talked about religious issues, it led to conflict tension, and ultimately emotional apathy because they did not agree on religious matters and participation in religious ceremonies. One of the participants said, *“My husband is not a religious person. At first, this matter bothered me a lot and I used to cry, but now I don't care about it, but my parents are very unhappy and I am constantly arguing with them”* (Participant 1).

2. Forced and unexpected marriage

The participants reported that forced and unexpected

marriage was one of the factors leading to relationship disengagement. Some participants stated that they were married by force, unwillingly, and without inner consent. They also reported that they were unhappy and not optimistic about the future of their marriage. One of the participants said, *“I didn't know what would happen to me if I did not get married. I said yes to the first person who proposed to me because I was afraid that my grandmother would throw me out of the house”* (Participant 13).

3. Differences in values, personality, and socioeconomic status

The participants stated that differences in values, interests and beliefs, personality, and socioeconomic status could result in relationship disengagement. They stated that they could not talk about their interests, beliefs, and views on life with their spouses because they disagree with them and cannot reach an agreement, leading to more intense conflicts. The interviews with the participants also revealed that considerable family, cultural, and economic differences have also caused conflicts and distance between the couples. One participant stated *“My wife doesn't understand my favorite subjects. She talks about things that I think are too ridiculous and I can't accept my wife's opinions”* (Participant 18).

Individual – personality factors

Emotional instability

The participants reported their concerns about their spouse's emotional instability. Most of the participants stated that they were depressed and often unhappy and nothing can make them happy. People with emotional instability express higher levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. These problems can be attributed to low self-esteem and depression, adverse childhood experiences (trauma), social media addiction, and drug abuse.

1. Low self-confidence and depression

One of the factors that can affect relationship disengagement is depression. Couples with high depression do not enjoy anything, feel tired, have low self-esteem, and feel guilty. Besides, with the smallest failure, they show strong emotional reactions and experience higher levels of depression and anxiety. One participant said, *“I feel so lonely. I cry all the time. I have lost my confidence. I am not a good wife for my husband. I am not enough for him at all. I don't enjoy my life and I have no hope for the future”* (Participant 11).

2. Adverse childhood experiences (trauma)

Trauma and adverse childhood experiences are among the unpleasant events that happen to people in childhood. The effects of childhood trauma continue into adulthood and the affected person experiences emotional pain and suffering. Early life trauma experiences inside or outside

the family of origin, including sexual and physical abuse, are associated with various challenges in adulthood, such as changes in communication patterns and sexual intimacy problems. One participant stated, “When I was 5 years old, my mother died in a car crash. After that, my father married another woman and my sister and I lived with my grandmother. In the beginning, we had a lot of conflicts with my grandmother, but after years, things got a little better” (Participant 13).

3. Social media addiction

In the past years, the use of the Internet has increased and the number of Internet users has also increased significantly. Internet and social media addiction creates a disturbance in the relationship between couples and leads to a distance between them. Internet addiction causes isolation, loneliness, and disconnection from people around, especially spouses and children. One female participant stated, “My husband spends hours on his phone instead of talking to me” (Participant 5).

4. Drug abuse

Addiction to drugs, alcohol, psychotropic substances, and industrial substances causes serious damage to the family and is the main cause of divorce requests by women. Man’s addiction causes serious mental harm to women and children. Due to his behavioral characteristics, an addicted person is incapable of playing an effective spousal or parental role. One female participant stated that her husband smoked and used drugs and she could not talk about it with her family of origin: “My husband smokes and uses drugs and I can’t stand it at all” (Participant 1).

Character traits

Data analysis showed that personality is an effective factor in the relationship between couples and some personality traits such as low compatibility, low emotional expression, and unwillingness to forgive adversely affect the quality of marital relationships.

1. Low compatibility

Some participants stated that they could not bear the smallest problems in life and this gradually led to increased conflicts and emotional distance. One of the female participants stated, “I can’t stand our relationship anymore. I can’t stand our conflicts. As time goes by, more and more problems pile up” (Participant 9).

2. Low emotional expression

Couples gradually reveal their innermost thoughts and feelings. Some participants reported that they lacked self-disclosure and rarely talked about their inner feelings and thoughts. One of the participants stated “My husband does not know how to express love. I think he doesn’t want to express his love. He’s shy” (Participant 8). “I like to shout

and start a fight to exchange something. My husband says you talk so I can talk” (Participant 9).

3. Unwillingness to forgive

Tolerating the spouse’s misbehavior and forgiveness is one of the ways to prevent disengagement and restore peace to the marital system. Forgiveness and tolerance gradually decrease for some reason, and couples judge their spouse’s behaviors and thoughts, which increases resentment between them. One of the female participants said, “I can’t forgive my husband. I keep thinking about the past and remembering the things he did and the lies he told” (Participant 1).

Socioeconomic factors

Financial and vocational issues

Financial and vocational issues such as low income, unemployment, and job stress are stressors that affect the quality of marital relationships.

1. Low income and unemployment

Poverty, unemployment, and low income were other problems reported by the participants. Most of the participants stated that their husband’s unemployment and low income caused a decrease in love and intimacy between them. Thus, they could not go through life’s adversities and this paved the way for the interference of others, violence, and infidelity. A female participant stated, “My husband has two jobs to pay for our expenses, but we still have financial problems” (Participant 11).

2. Job stress

Another problem reported by the participants was job stress. Some participants reported that they had a full-time and stressful job with a substantial workload. One male participant said, “I go to work at 5 in the morning and come back at 7 in the afternoon. My job is boring and low-paid. I have to endure more stress and hardship but I can’t quit my job. Sometimes I want to pursue my favorite job, but I’m afraid I won’t succeed” (Participant 6).

Perceived fairness and inequality

The unbalanced distribution of male power and dominance was also reported by the participants as another factor affecting relationship disengagement. The participants admitted the submission of women to the authority of men and acceptance of the status quo. Changing the role of women in the community also changes social roles. The concept of modern women has led to the emergence of new tasks such as dividing the household chores between husband and wife. Changing the roles of men and women and misunderstanding these roles can lead to conflict between spouses, and ultimately failure in joint parenting and unequal power distribution.

1. Unequal power distribution

The participants stated that they should accept their partner's authority. They also reported when they realized that they could not change their situation, they accepted the inequality and felt hopeless. Some of the participants argued with their partners and tried to engage in the final decision. One of the female participants said, "My husband is against my studying and working. He didn't let me finish my studies and now he won't let me find a job" (Participant 6).

2. Failure in joint parenting

Incompatibility and disagreement between spouses in raising children is one of the most common causes of conflicts between spouses. For example, a male participant stated: "After the birth of the child, our problems started and my wife became moody. My wife is very strict with my daughter and believes that we must follow the rules strictly. We should sleep and eat on time. My wife does not allow my daughter to play mobile games or watch TV, and this makes me angry" (Participant 6). "My husband does not spend time with the children at all and the children are afraid of him" (Participant 9).

Discussion

This qualitative conventional content study investigated factors affecting relationship disengagement in married couples. The analysis of the data from the participants' interviews revealed three themes, eight categories, and twenty-four subcategories. The main categories extracted in this study were problems related to the family of origin, conflict in couple interactions, distancing behaviors, ineffective spouse selection, emotional instability, character traits, financial and vocational issues, and perceived fairness and inequality. A look at the literature shows that previous studies have addressed the relationships of some variables with relationship disengagement, such as neuroticism and negative affect (17) and marital commitment (16,18). The data in the present study showed that other factors play a role in relationship disengagement, which have not been addressed in previous studies.

The findings indicated the problems related to the family of origin can affect relationship disengagement. The participants stated that they had negative feelings towards their parents, were neglected by their parents in childhood, and did not receive emotional support from their parents. These findings were consistent with the literature that confirmed the relationship between the atmosphere of the family of origin with the quality of children's relationships in adulthood (19). The findings of the present study, in line with previous studies, indicated that the family of origin plays an essential role in mental health, especially in intimate relationships in adulthood. The present study showed that ineffective

parenting style, i.e. authoritarian and permissive, as well as disorders within the family of origin, such as parental conflicts, divorce, addiction, etc., can have negative effects and serious damage to children's intimate relationships during adulthood.

The second factor affecting relationship disengagement was conflict in couple interactions. The participants stated that when they wanted to communicate with each other, they faced many issues and did not know how to communicate effectively. Previous studies have also shown that effective communication prevents misunderstandings between spouses and improves their quality of life (20). Couples can resolve their conflicts successfully with an effective communication pattern. Consistent with the literature, previous studies have highlighted the vital role of conflict resolution in enhancing marital satisfaction (21). In line with previous studies, the present study confirmed the impact of conflicting relationships and the influential role of effective communication skills and having logical communication beliefs in marital intimacy. Effective communication helps couples solve their problems and reduce conflicts.

The present study also showed that distancing behaviors, such as humiliating, expressing destructive or unconstructive criticism, insults, or disrespectful behaviors affect relationship satisfaction and increase marital non-commitment. The relationship between warm and hostile behavior and marital quality has been confirmed in previous studies (22,23). Previous studies in Iran have also addressed factors affecting domestic violence (24). The present study suggested that distancing behaviors, including aggressive behaviors, failure to meet expectations and needs, sexual problems, low empathy and emotional support, and low commitment can decrease marital satisfaction and increase relationship disengagement.

The findings from the present study also indicated that ineffective spouse selection deeply affects marital relationships. Whether similarities or differences between couples lead to marital satisfaction has always been one of the topics of research interest. Research supports the similarity between couples (25). In line with previous studies, the present study confirmed the role of ineffective spouse selection in relationship disengagement. Differences and inconsistencies in values, interests, personality, and religious beliefs were highly emphasized by the participants. The existence of similarities in views and opinions in couples helps couples talk to each other about their marital problems. Usually, people tend to marry someone who shares similar values, interests, and beliefs because similarity attracts the parties to each other and increases intimacy in the relationship.

The data in the present study showed that emotional instability also affects relationship disengagement.

Similarly, researchers have strongly indicated that depression is related to marital dissatisfaction (26). People with high neuroticism tend to experience high levels of depression, anxiety, and stress and have low self-confidence. At the same time, Internet addiction and drug abuse lead to conflicts and distance between couples and gradually cause separation and divorce. Moreover, social networks and the Internet are among entertainment and modern technologies. Social media addiction causes isolation from the community and adversely affects the quality of relationships. Social media addiction can also reflect signs of substance abuse, including difficulty with self-regulation, neglect of personal life, cognitive issues, addictive behaviors, and avoidance. Previous studies in Iran have reported that infidelity is one of the factors affecting divorce (27). In line with previous studies, the present study showed that emotional instability, traumatic experiences, depression, drug abuse, and addiction to the Internet and social networks can contribute to relationship disengagement.

Following previous studies, the findings of the present study showed character traits can affect relationship disengagement. Tolerating the misbehavior of the spouse and forgiving is one of the ways to prevent the relationship from breaking up and restore peace to the marital system. A person who has low resilience cannot adapt himself/herself to marital difficulties and problems, and cannot think flexibly to solve problems, leading to emotional apathy and relationship disengagement in couples.

The present study confirmed that financial and vocational issues are one of the stressors affecting relationship disengagement. Studies have shown that financial strain is associated with low marital satisfaction and relationship instability (28). The data in the present study showed most couples had full-time jobs and assumed stressful tasks and responsibilities, and a person who works in a chaotic environment does not have a supportive relationship and takes on excessive responsibilities without sufficient help and support from others. A monotonous workplace and unclear or excessive job expectations negatively affect marital relationships.

As confirmed in previous studies in Iran, another factor that leads to relationship disengagement is perceived fairness and inequality. The participants in this study stated that their husbands do not help them with household affairs and raising children, and this causes excessive fatigue and feelings of sadness and depression in women. Marital life is associated with many responsibilities and tasks that a person must perform, but in separated couples, the spouse or spouses do not accept their new role and responsibility and do not adapt to it.

This study was conducted with some limitations. First, the participants were selected only from three counseling and psychological service centers in Mashhad (Iran). Second, the findings from this study should not

be generalized to couples who have chronic psychological problems (i.e., psychotic disorders and severe mood disorders) and chronic diseases (i.e., diabetes, cancer, etc.). The results of this study can help to know the experiences of couples with relationship disengagement who do not have acute psychiatric disorders and chronic physical diseases. The insights from this study can contribute to developing more effective interventions to help these couples and prevent divorce. Furthermore, couple therapy models should focus on the factors highlighted in this study to avoid more relationship disengagement in couples.

Conclusion

The present study showed that relationship disengagement is caused by several factors that can cause distance, marital dissatisfaction, and especially dissolution of marriage over time. According to the findings, relationship disengagement is associated with problems related to the family of origin, conflict in couple interactions, distancing behaviors, ineffective spouse selection, emotional instability, character traits, financial and vocational issues, and perceived fairness and inequality.

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Authors' Contribution

Conceptualization: Faezeh Salayani, Mohammad Javad Asghari Ebrahimabad.

Data curation: Faezeh Salayani, Mohammad Javad Asghari Ebrahimabad, Behrooz Mahram.

Formal analysis: Faezeh Salayani, Behrooz Mahram, Sakineh Soltani Kouhbanani.

Investigation: Faezeh Salayani.

Methodology: Faezeh Salayani, Behrooz Mahram.

Project administration: Mohammad Javad Asghari Ebrahimabad.

Resources: Faezeh Salayani.

Software: Faezeh Salayani, Behrooz Mahram.

Supervision: Mohammad Javad Asghari Ebrahimabad, Mohammad Ali Besharat.

Validation: Mohammad Javad Asghari Ebrahimabad, Mohammad Ali Besharat, Sakineh Soltani Kouhbanani.

Visualization: Mohammad Javad Asghari Ebrahimabad, Mohammad Ali Besharat.

Writing—original draft: Faezeh Salayani, Mohammad Javad Asghari Ebrahimabad.

Writing—review & editing: Mohammad Javad Asghari Ebrahimabad, Mohammad Ali Besharat, Faezeh Salayani, Behrooz Mahram, Sakineh Soltani Kouhbanani.

Competing Interests

The authors declared no conflict of interest in this study.

Ethical Approval

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad (IR.UM.REC.1401.182).

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