

Exploring Spouses' Lived Experiences of Marriage to Only Children

Mohammad Mahdi. Eftekhari¹, Fatemeh. Shirvani¹

1 Department of Psychology, Kho.C., Islamic Azad University, Khomeinishahr, Iran

*Correspondence: fatemeh.shirvani3084@iau.ir

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to explore spouses' lived experiences of marriage to only children. This qualitative study employed a descriptive phenomenological design, and data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The study population consisted of all spouses of only children living in Isfahan during 2025–2026. Participants were selected through purposive sampling. Data saturation was reached after interviews with 11 spouses of only children. The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) method. Three main themes were extracted from the lived experiences of the spouses of only children: (1) opportunities and facilitating factors associated with marriage to only children, (2) challenges and pressures associated with marriage to only children, and (3) personality and behavioral patterns of only children. The lived experiences of spouses of only children reflected a combination of distinctive challenges concerning relational boundaries, emotional opportunities, and stability orientation. The findings also indicated that widespread negative stereotypes do not necessarily represent the actual lived experiences of these spouses. Awareness of these experiences may assist young people considering this type of marriage, as well as family counselors, in managing the challenges specific to marriages involving only children.

Keywords: lived experiences, spouses, only children

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Introduction

Marriage is not merely a union between two individuals; rather, it represents the formation of a new relational system in which the developmental histories, emotional attachments, communication patterns, family structures, and social expectations of both partners interact. From a systemic perspective, marital relationships are embedded within broader family networks, and the functioning of a couple cannot be fully understood without considering the influence of each partner's family of origin. Bowen's family systems theory emphasizes that individuals enter marriage while carrying established patterns of emotional dependence, differentiation, anxiety regulation, and intergenerational transmission from their original families (1). Accordingly, characteristics associated with family size, sibling position, parental expectations, and the distribution of emotional and material resources may continue to shape an individual's behavior

after marriage. Minuchin likewise conceptualizes the family as an organized system composed of interdependent subsystems, boundaries, hierarchies, and interactional rules; from this viewpoint, marital adjustment is strongly affected by the extent to which appropriate boundaries are established between the newly formed marital subsystem and the families of origin (2). These theoretical perspectives are especially relevant to marriages involving only children because the absence of siblings may influence family roles, parental investment, relational boundaries, and the degree of emotional centrality assigned to the child.

An only child occupies a structurally unique position within the family. Unlike children who grow up with siblings, an only child does not experience the continuous sharing of parental attention, economic resources, domestic space, family responsibilities, and emotional roles with brothers or sisters. This structural position may generate certain developmental opportunities while simultaneously creating distinctive interpersonal challenges. In many families, the only child becomes the primary focus of parental aspirations, concern, affection, monitoring, and investment. The child may therefore receive extensive educational, financial, and emotional support but may also experience concentrated expectations and heightened parental control. Such conditions can influence autonomy, emotional differentiation, coping skills, and expectations of close relationships. When the only child later marries, the spouse enters not only a dyadic relationship but also an established family system in which the only child may have functioned for years as the principal object of parental attachment and the central recipient of family resources. Consequently, marriage to an only child may involve specific opportunities, pressures, and relational negotiations that differ from those encountered in marriages involving individuals from multi-child families.

Only-child families have often been discussed through culturally persistent stereotypes. Only children are frequently described as self-centered, spoiled, socially isolated, excessively dependent, narcissistic, or less capable of cooperation. However, empirical evidence has repeatedly challenged the assumption that the absence of siblings necessarily produces maladaptive personality development. In a quantitative review of research on only children and personality development, Polit and Falbo found little support for broad negative stereotypes and demonstrated that only children were not systematically disadvantaged across major personality domains (3). Their findings suggested that many commonly held beliefs about only children are based more on cultural assumptions than on consistent empirical evidence. More recent research has similarly shown that only children are not inherently more narcissistic than individuals with siblings. Foster and colleagues found further evidence against the stereotype that only children display higher levels of narcissism, indicating that sibling status alone is insufficient to explain narcissistic traits (4). These findings highlight the importance of avoiding deterministic interpretations and instead examining how family processes, parenting practices, socioeconomic conditions, and cultural contexts shape the experiences and behaviors of only children.

Nevertheless, the absence of a simple association between only-child status and negative personality traits does not mean that family structure is irrelevant. Rather, the effects of being an only child may depend on the quality of parenting, the concentration of family resources, the strength of parental expectations, and the broader sociocultural environment. A sociocultural perspective suggests that personality-related outcomes emerge from the interaction between individual experiences and cultural systems of value, status, competition, and family aspiration. Research on narcissism in modern China, for example, has shown that self-related characteristics must be interpreted in relation to rapid social change, cultural expectations, and

parenting contexts rather than attributed solely to family size (5). In families where the only child becomes the exclusive bearer of parental hopes, high investment may contribute to competence, confidence, and educational opportunity, while excessive idealization or unmoderated gratification may foster unrealistic expectations or a sense of entitlement. Thus, the developmental consequences of being an only child are neither universally positive nor uniformly negative; they are shaped by the meanings and practices surrounding the child's position within a specific family and culture.

Parental expectations constitute one of the most influential features of only-child family dynamics. Because parents have only one child through whom to realize educational, occupational, social, and familial aspirations, expectations may become highly concentrated. Chiang's investigation of parental expectations and parent-child relationships among Chinese family groups indicated that expectations can significantly influence relational quality and may be experienced either as support and encouragement or as pressure and control, depending on how they are communicated and interpreted (6). More recent evidence has shown that parental educational expectations may differ between only children and children with siblings and may have consequences for both academic and psychological development (7). Only children may benefit from greater parental attention and educational investment, but they may also face intensified pressure to succeed because no sibling is available to share the burden of parental aspirations. These concentrated expectations may continue into adulthood and marriage, where parents may remain highly involved in the only child's decisions regarding employment, residence, fertility, child-rearing, and marital life.

The parenting of only children may also involve distinctive patterns of protection, closeness, and monitoring. Khadaroo and MacCallum's mixed-methods study of parents of adolescent only children indicated that the parenting experience is characterized by both opportunities for close relationships and concerns about overprotection, autonomy, social development, and future responsibility (8). Parents may invest more time and attention in the only child and develop an emotionally intimate relationship, yet this closeness may make separation and independence more difficult. In adulthood, such dynamics may be reflected in frequent contact, continued reliance on parental approval, or parental involvement in personal decisions. After marriage, the spouse of the only child may perceive this parental closeness as supportive when it provides emotional, practical, or financial assistance. However, the same closeness may be experienced as intrusive when family boundaries are unclear or when the parents remain involved in the couple's private affairs. From a structural family perspective, the central issue is not closeness itself but whether the boundaries between the marital subsystem and the parental subsystem are sufficiently clear and flexible (2).

The emotional relationship between an only child and the family of origin may also affect marital functioning through processes such as triangulation. Triangulation occurs when tension between two members of a relationship is managed by involving a third person, often a parent or another family member. In only-child families, the emotionally close parent-child bond may make parental involvement in marital conflicts more likely, particularly when the only child has not developed sufficient differentiation from the family of origin. Research examining marital satisfaction and triangulation among only-child families has demonstrated that patterns of parental involvement and triangular relationships are relevant to the quality of marital relationships (9). A married only child may disclose marital problems to parents, seek their intervention, or expect them to mediate disagreements. Such behavior may provide temporary emotional

relief but may weaken the couple's capacity to resolve conflict independently and may cause the spouse to feel excluded, scrutinized, or subordinated to the family of origin. Bowen's theory suggests that low differentiation and unresolved emotional attachment can intensify these processes, especially under conditions of stress (1).

At the same time, marriage to an only child may provide considerable practical and economic advantages. The family resource dilution perspective proposes that parental resources become more limited as the number of children increases because time, money, attention, and educational investment must be divided among siblings. Conversely, only children may receive a greater share of available family resources. Wang and Feng showed that the dilution of family resources in expanded families can affect educational investment, whereas married only daughters may retain forms of empowerment because parental resources are not dispersed among multiple children (10). In the context of marriage, this concentration of resources may result in substantial financial assistance, housing support, childcare, educational opportunities, and inheritance benefits for the couple. Parents of an only child may also be more available to support their child and the child's spouse during illness, employment, education, or parenting. Such support can reduce financial stress, facilitate occupational and academic development, and provide the couple with a stronger sense of security.

The economic advantages associated with marriage to an only child may influence partner selection and perceptions in the marriage market. At the same time, potential spouses may anticipate future caregiving burdens, parental dependence, or concentrated family obligations. Kawata and Komura examined the existence of an only-child matching penalty in the marriage market and demonstrated that only-child status can influence marital matching because individuals may evaluate both the benefits and potential obligations attached to marrying an only child (11). The anticipated responsibility for caring for aging parents may be particularly salient when there are no siblings with whom duties can be shared. A spouse may expect that financial, emotional, and caregiving obligations toward the only child's parents will eventually become part of the marital relationship. Thus, only-child status may be interpreted simultaneously as an indicator of concentrated family resources and as a source of concentrated family responsibility.

These competing dimensions are especially visible in decisions concerning fertility and child-rearing. Parents of an only child may place strong pressure on the married couple to have children because grandchildren are viewed as essential to the continuation of the family lineage and as new objects of emotional investment. Grandparents may offer extensive financial and caregiving support to encourage childbearing, but their intense involvement may also create conflict regarding parenting authority and boundaries. The couple may benefit from readily available childcare and material assistance, yet the grandparents may disregard parental rules, overindulge the grandchild, or intervene in decisions about education, discipline, nutrition, and daily routines. The interaction between marital satisfaction, parenting, and child outcomes has been examined in only-child family research. Chen and Zhou found that maternal warmth and marital satisfaction were relevant to the weight status and family environment of only children, underscoring the interconnectedness of couple functioning, parenting processes, and child development (12). Their findings support the broader family-systems assumption that experiences within the marital relationship can affect the child, while the child's position in the family can also shape parental and marital interactions.

The implications of only-child family structure are not limited to the couple and their parents; they may also affect the next generation. Children born to an only child may grow up with a restricted kinship network, particularly when both parents are only children. Such children may have no maternal or paternal aunts and uncles and may consequently have fewer cousins or family-based peers. This restricted network can reduce access to certain forms of emotional, recreational, and practical support commonly available in extended families. In contrast, the child may receive concentrated attention from grandparents and may benefit from significant financial and educational investment. Therefore, the intergenerational consequences of marriage to an only child include both the narrowing of kinship roles and the concentration of grandparental resources. Understanding these consequences requires attention to lived experience because the same structural condition may be perceived as security by one spouse and as isolation or excessive involvement by another.

The cultural context is essential when examining the experience of marriage to only children. Family structures and expectations are shaped by social norms concerning intergenerational solidarity, filial responsibility, marriage, childbearing, gender roles, and support for aging parents. In societies where family relationships are highly interdependent, marriage does not fully separate individuals from their families of origin. Parents may continue to play an active role in financial decisions, residence, caregiving, and conflict resolution. Under such conditions, the only child's marital relationship may become a central arena in which parental expectations and couple autonomy must be negotiated. Iranian families have historically emphasized close intergenerational bonds, parental support, family loyalty, and responsibility toward older family members. Consequently, marriage to an only child may involve a distinctive combination of intensive support and intensive obligation.

Iran has also experienced demographic and cultural changes that have increased the prevalence and social visibility of only-child families. Declining fertility, urbanization, economic uncertainty, changing aspirations, women's educational and occupational participation, and concerns about the costs of raising children have contributed to smaller family sizes. Research on the lived experiences of Iranian women regarding having an only child has shown that the decision to have one child is shaped by multiple economic, social, familial, and personal considerations and is associated with both perceived advantages and concerns about future consequences (13). These findings suggest that only-child families in Iran should not be understood as a homogeneous group. Their experiences depend on socioeconomic status, parental age, cultural beliefs, family support, fertility intentions, and the meanings attributed to parenthood. As the number of only children reaching marriageable age increases, it becomes increasingly important to examine how their spouses experience the relational and familial consequences of this family structure.

The literature has primarily focused on the psychological development of only children, parental expectations, educational investment, narcissism, adolescent adjustment, or parent-child relationships. Although these studies have provided valuable evidence, they have paid comparatively limited attention to the experiences of individuals who marry only children. Existing research often assesses only children directly or examines parents' perceptions, while the spouse's perspective remains underexplored. Yet spouses occupy a unique observational position because they encounter the adult only child within daily marital life and simultaneously interact with the partner's family of origin. They can therefore describe how only-child family dynamics are manifested in financial arrangements, emotional dependence, household

responsibilities, conflict management, privacy, fertility expectations, grandparental involvement, and caregiving obligations.

A phenomenological approach is particularly appropriate for examining these experiences because marriage to an only child cannot be reduced to a list of predetermined positive or negative characteristics. The meanings of support, interference, dependence, privilege, responsibility, and intimacy are constructed through everyday interactions. For example, frequent parental contact may be interpreted by one spouse as affection and by another as surveillance. Financial assistance may create security but may also increase parental influence over the couple's decisions. The absence of siblings-in-law may reduce conflict and competition, yet it may also place all future caregiving responsibilities on one couple. Similarly, a close relationship between the only child and the parents may reflect emotional warmth but may undermine marital boundaries when the parents are repeatedly included in private disagreements. Qualitative inquiry enables these apparent contradictions to be examined through the participants' own descriptions rather than through stereotypes or externally imposed assumptions.

Exploring spouses' lived experiences can also provide practical insights for premarital counseling, family therapy, and marital education. Counselors working with couples involving an only child may need to assess intergenerational boundaries, the distribution of caregiving responsibilities, parental expectations regarding fertility, financial dependence, conflict-resolution patterns, and the spouse's sense of inclusion within the family. Awareness of both facilitating and challenging aspects can prevent pathologizing the only child while helping couples anticipate predictable areas of tension. Such knowledge may also enable families to preserve beneficial forms of support without compromising the autonomy of the marital subsystem. Therefore, the aim of the present study was to explore the lived experiences of spouses regarding marriage to only children.

Methods and Materials

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore spouses' lived experiences of marriage to only children. The study population consisted of all spouses of only children living in Isfahan during 2025–2026. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and the sample size was determined according to the principle of data saturation in qualitative research. Recruitment and interviewing continued until the interviewer obtained no new information during the interviews. Accordingly, the participants comprised 11 spouses of only children. The inclusion criteria were being married to an only child, having been married and living together for at least three years, and providing full consent to participate in the interview. The exclusion criteria included an inability to provide relevant and sufficiently informative responses, being in a critical marital situation such as undergoing divorce proceedings, and unwillingness to continue participating in the study. Data were collected through a researcher-developed semi-structured interview. To formulate the interview questions, a mind map was initially developed to represent various dimensions of marital life and relationships with only children. The map covered different aspects of marriage to an only child, including how only children communicate with others, characteristics specific to only children, and their approaches to problem-solving. Examples of the interview questions included the following: "Please separately describe the social, familial, economic, and marital advantages of marrying an only child"; "What advantages are present in your marital life as the spouse of an only child that are absent from the lives of your friends who are not in this type of marriage?"

“What disadvantages are present in your marital life as the spouse of an only child that are absent from the lives of your friends who are not in this type of marriage?”; “Which negative characteristics of your spouse do you believe are attributable to their being an only child?”; and “What issues and situations associated with this type of marriage have imposed various limitations on you?” Each interview lasted between 40 and 50 minutes, depending on the participant’s willingness to respond to the questions. To observe ethical considerations, at the beginning of each interview, participants were provided with comprehensive explanations regarding the purpose of the study, the interview procedure, the principles of confidentiality and information privacy, and their right to participate in or withdraw from the interviews. Written informed consent was then obtained from all participants. The data were analyzed using Colaizzi’s (1978) method. Colaizzi’s method consists of seven stages. The first and second stages involve carefully reviewing all descriptions and extracting statements and sentences relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. The third and fourth stages involve formulating meanings from the extracted statements and organizing expressions or concepts shared among participants into specific categories. The fifth stage involves integrating all inferred meanings into an exhaustive and comprehensive description. Finally, the sixth and seventh stages involve transforming the comprehensive description of the phenomenon into a concise statement of its fundamental structure and conducting final validation. To establish credibility, four family counseling specialists with more than five years of professional experience reviewed the categories extracted from the interviews. Furthermore, after each interview, the interviewer’s written records were provided to the participants so that the necessary revisions could be made in accordance with their perspectives.

Findings and Results

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the study participants.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

No.	Participant Age	Gender of Interviewee	Length of Marriage	Educational Attainment	Occupation
1	35	Male	6 years	Bachelor’s degree	Employee
2	26	Female	4 years	Master’s degree	Employee
3	32	Female	9 years	Bachelor’s degree	Homemaker
4	30	Male	4 years	High school diploma	Self-employed
5	41	Female	12 years	Doctoral degree	Employee
6	37	Female	7 years	Bachelor’s degree	Homemaker
7	25	Female	3 years	Bachelor’s degree	Homemaker
8	33	Female	9 years	High school diploma	Homemaker
9	28	Female	5 years	Master’s degree	Employee
10	42	Female	17 years	Bachelor’s degree	Homemaker
11	33	Female	8 years	Bachelor’s degree	Homemaker

Table 2. Final Results of Interview Coding and Thematic Analysis

Themes/Codes	Subthemes	Main Themes
1. Financial resources are not divided among multiple children. 2. Recreational and welfare resources are exclusively available to the only child. 3. The spouse’s family is able to purchase a residential property after the couple begins married life. 4. The only child is the sole embodiment of the parents’ aspirations, and all of their wishes and needs are fulfilled. 5. A complete dowry is provided for the daughter based on the attitude that “we have only this one child.”	Sustainable financial security and economic well-being	Opportunities and facilitating factors associated with marriage to only children

1. The spouse can continue education and employment because household responsibilities are performed by the mother-in-law. 2. The grandparents care for the couple's children, who are their only grandchildren, when the parents are unavailable. 3. The need for babysitters and childcare centers, as well as the concerns associated with them, is eliminated because the parents of the only child care for the grandchild.	Comprehensive parental support for the couple's life	Opportunities and facilitating factors associated with marriage to only children
1. The daughter-in-law replaces the daughter the family never had. 2. The son-in-law replaces the son the family never had. 3. The daughter-in-law or son-in-law is trusted fully as a family member. 4. Important family matters are shared with the daughter-in-law or son-in-law. 5. Ceremonies and gatherings are organized with the expectation that the daughter-in-law or son-in-law will attend.	Full acceptance of the daughter-in-law or son-in-law as a core family member	Opportunities and facilitating factors associated with marriage to only children
1. The wife has no sister-in-law or co-sister-in-law with whom she might be compared. 2. The husband has no brother-in-law or co-brother-in-law whose abilities in managing family life might be compared with his own. 3. Relative psychological tranquility exists because there is no intense competition with extended-family members such as sisters-in-law and co-sisters-in-law.	Avoidance of inter-kinship conflicts and competition	Opportunities and facilitating factors associated with marriage to only children
1. The spouse's family insists on childbearing despite the short time elapsed since the marriage. 2. Stereotypical and traditional beliefs emphasize continuation of the family lineage. 3. Incentives such as money and material resources are offered to encourage the couple to have children quickly.	Pressure to have children	Challenges and pressures associated with marriage to only children
1. Family roles such as paternal aunt, maternal aunt, and similar relationships are meaningless or unfamiliar to the child. 2. The child is alone as the grandchild of an only-child family. 3. The child has no family-based playmates, such as cousins.	Absence of a kinship network for the child	Challenges and pressures associated with marriage to only children
1. The parents insist that the couple live with them because they are alone. 2. The couple lacks autonomy and freedom in matters such as travel and attending gatherings. 3. Marital trips and recreational activities are shared with the spouse's family. 4. Members of the spouse's family enter the couple's home or bedroom without permission.	Lack of personal privacy and the shared nature of marital affairs	Challenges and pressures associated with marriage to only children
1. The couple is expected to assist with family gatherings and ceremonies. 2. The husband's family becomes upset when the couple does not visit or maintain frequent contact. 3. The couple is expected to care for the husband's parents during illness.	Role-based and duty-oriented expectations of the couple	Challenges and pressures associated with marriage to only children
1. The couple's peace is disrupted under the justification of parental worry and concern. 2. Parents repeatedly check on their child's health and well-being. 3. The couple is continuously expected to report their current status, regardless of time and place.	Separation anxiety and continuous monitoring of the couple	Challenges and pressures associated with marriage to only children
1. The grandchild is spoiled through excessive access to resources such as mobile phones. 2. Excessive affection toward the grandchild reinforces undesirable behavioral characteristics. 3. Parental authority is weakened because grandparents repeatedly interfere with the rules established by the parents.	Caregiving and educational interference in the child-rearing process	Challenges and pressures associated with marriage to only children

1. Excessive expectations are placed on the husband to satisfy individual needs. 2. Personal items are purchased beyond actual need. 3. The only-child spouse has excessive expectations of the husband's family and compares the quality of marital life with the standard of living in their family of origin.	Unrealistic expectations of marital life	Personality and behavioral patterns of only children
1. Only children receive diverse forms of training because their parents spend substantial amounts of money on them. 2. Only children possess educational, artistic, and athletic skills. 3. Their leisure time is filled with extracurricular classes due to their parents' concentrated attention to their development.	Maximum parental investment in empowering the child	Personality and behavioral patterns of only children
1. The only child discusses personal and marital issues within the family of origin. 2. The only child expects others, particularly the parents, to resolve marital problems. 3. The mother serves as her son's confidante and is consulted and involved in marital matters.	Emotional dependence on the family of origin	Personality and behavioral patterns of only children
1. The spouse is unable to cook or fulfill household responsibilities because they did not perform such tasks at home. 2. The husband lacks the ability to perform technical or repair-related tasks because his father previously performed them.	Deficiencies in practical marital-life skills	Personality and behavioral patterns of only children
1. The only child displays excessive self-confidence and a sense of superiority because of access to extensive family resources. 2. The only child compares standards of living and boasts about the superior quality of life in their family of origin relative to that of a spouse raised in a multi-child family.	Superiority beliefs resulting from child-centered parenting	Personality and behavioral patterns of only children

Based on the data analysis, three main themes and 15 subthemes were identified regarding spouses' lived experiences of marriage to only children, as presented in Table 2.

Main Theme 1: Opportunities and Facilitating Factors Associated With Marriage to Only Children

1. Sustainable Financial Security and Economic Well-Being

One of the most prominent subthemes in the lived experiences of the spouses of only children who participated in this study was a sense of economic security resulting from the concentration of family resources. Because the parents of only children do not need to allocate financial resources among several children, they devote all their assets and financial capital to their sole child. Consequently, after their child begins married life, these financial resources become concentrated on the couple, and the parents direct their material resources and financial capital toward them. Participants repeatedly referred to the purchase of housing after the beginning of married life, the provision of a dowry beyond customary standards, and the payment of substantial wedding expenses. Such financial support can reduce economic stress during the early years of marriage and provide a stable foundation for the couple's development. Participant 2 stated, "Before our marriage contract, my father-in-law bought us a house, which eliminated the stress of having to rent a home." Participant 5 similarly stated, "Although the economic conditions in our society are not good and the price of gold is extremely high, my husband's family bought a large amount of gold for me for the wedding, including a complete gold set and a diamond ring. I think they did this because they had only one son."

2. Comprehensive Parental Support for the Couple's Life

The spouses of only children acknowledged that, because the parents had no other children, they devoted all their emotional and psychological energy to their child and the child's marital life and consequently provided the couple with extensive support. Participants described several forms of support, including caring for grandchildren on a full-time basis without imposing a sense of obligation, undertaking household duties, and completing domestic tasks when the couple was ill, employed, or continuing their education. Participant 5 stated, "When I wanted to prepare for the doctoral entrance examination, my mother-in-law did all my work, including cooking and cleaning the house, so that I could study. This was extremely helpful to me."

3. Full Acceptance of the Daughter-in-Law or Son-in-Law as a Core Family Member

The spouses of only children, particularly the female participants, stated that when the spouse's family had no child of the same gender as the daughter-in-law or son-in-law, the parents developed emotional bonds with them that extended beyond their conventional in-law roles. The parents perceived the daughter-in-law or son-in-law as a substitute for the daughter or son they had never had. This perception was manifested in the parents' behavior and encouraged them to share family matters and private family information with the daughter-in-law or son-in-law. Collectively, these behaviors created a sense of genuine acceptance by the spouse's family. The participants perceived this experience as different from that of multi-child families, in which distinct relational rules frequently govern interactions with daughters-in-law and sons-in-law. Participant 2 stated, "My husband's family loves me very much and shows me a great deal of affection. I do not know, but perhaps it is because they do not have a daughter and have accepted me as a substitute for their own daughter."

4. Avoidance of Inter-Kinship Conflicts and Competition

In multi-child families, an implicit form of competition may develop among daughters-in-law and sons-in-law for parental approval. Continuous comparisons among them in terms of physical attractiveness, financial status, and the extent of services provided to the spouse's family are relatively common. Almost all participants stated that typical kinship-related tensions, including conflicts with sisters-in-law, the management of complicated family relationships, and comparisons with co-brothers-in-law or co-sisters-in-law, were absent in marriages to only children. The absence of these family roles represented the elimination of a substantial source of emotional harm. Therefore, the lack of kinship competition in marriage to an only child was perceived as a meaningful and qualitatively positive absence. Participant 9 stated, "One advantage of my marriage is that, from the moment I entered my husband's family, I did not have any conflict or mental preoccupation involving a co-sister-in-law or sister-in-law. Compared with my sister, who was distressed by these issues, I was much more comfortable."

Main Theme 2: Challenges and Pressures Associated With Marriage to Only Children

1. Pressure to Have Children

The first subtheme identified among the challenges and pressures associated with marriage to only children was the organized insistence and enthusiasm of the parents of only children regarding the couple's childbearing. Contrary to the common perception that pressure to have children is merely traditional and distressing, this pressure assumed different and, in some respects, facilitative dimensions in only-child families. The insistence was not limited to coercive pressure; rather, it functioned as an invitation to participate in the continuation of the family lineage and was accompanied by supportive and incentive-based arrangements provided by the parents of the only child. Participant 9 stated, "My father-in-law once said to

me, ‘My daughter, just give birth to one child, and I will cover all the expenses and provide everything the child needs.’” Participant 6 similarly stated, “Although only one year had passed since our wedding, my husband’s family placed us under intense pressure to have a child.”

2. Absence of a Kinship Network for the Child

In extended families, children and grandchildren are surrounded by a broad network of family roles, including maternal aunts, paternal aunts, maternal uncles, and paternal uncles, each of whom may perform supportive, emotional, and educational functions. At a secondary relational level, children also grow up within a network of cousins and family-based peers. These relationships can provide a context for developing characteristics such as cooperation and conflict-resolution skills. In marriages involving only children, all these roles may suddenly be absent, and various extended-family relationships may have little or no meaning for the couple’s children. Participant 10 stated, “Before my son’s sister was born, he did not like going to my mother-in-law and father-in-law’s house because he was alone there and had no playmate.”

3. Lack of Personal Privacy and the Shared Nature of Marital Affairs

One of the concerns expressed by the spouses of only children was the lack of secure marital privacy and the integration of different aspects of married life with the spouse’s family. The spouses of only children, particularly the female participants, stated that because only children represent their parents’ sole emotional investment, their families perceive themselves as having a legitimate interest in all dimensions of their child’s marital life. Some participants also noted that, despite the considerable time that had passed since the beginning of their marriage, they did not feel that they had an independent marital relationship. Participant 11 stated, “At the beginning of our marriage, my mother-in-law had a key to our house. One Friday, I woke up and saw that she had prepared breakfast for us and placed it on the table.” Participant 1 similarly stated, “Whenever my wife and I want to travel, she expects her parents to come with us. She says they have no one except her.”

4. Role-Based and Duty-Oriented Expectations of the Couple

In multi-child families, responsibilities and expectations concerning the parents are distributed among several children, thereby reducing the burden placed on each individual. Participants in this study, particularly those raised in large families, stated that all parental responsibilities and expectations in only-child families are placed on one person. After the beginning of married life, the spouse of the only child also becomes an assistant to their partner and participates extensively in fulfilling these obligations. Participant 9 stated, “Whenever my husband’s family has guests, they tell my husband and me several days in advance so that we can go and help them.”

5. Separation Anxiety and Continuous Monitoring of the Couple

One of the recurrent subthemes identified across the interviews was parental separation anxiety and continuous monitoring of the couple. Because only children are perceived as their parents’ sole attachment figures, the parents attempt to reduce their anxiety and fear regarding possible harm to their child by continuously monitoring the child’s behavior, activities, and location. After the child begins married life, these behaviors can disrupt the peace of the spouse and may be interpreted as controlling behavior and family interference in the couple’s life. Participant 2 stated, “Whenever we go somewhere without my husband’s parents, they constantly call us and become worried.” Participant 1 similarly stated, “During our

previous trip, my wife was constantly holding her phone, as though her only responsibility was to relieve her parents' worries."

6. Caregiving and Educational Interference in the Child-Rearing Process

For the parents of only children, grandchildren may become new and highly significant attachment figures after their own child. Consequently, grandparents may grant the grandchildren numerous privileges and disregard the educational boundaries and rules established by the children's parents. Providing these privileges in the parents' absence may weaken parental authority and diminish the parents' role in child-rearing. Participant 4 stated, "My spouse's family has spoiled our child so much that the child no longer takes us seriously at all." Participant 11 similarly stated, "When I take my child to my mother-in-law's house, they allow the child to use the phone so much that sometimes I think the child has become addicted to it, whereas this does not happen in our own home."

Main Theme 3: Personality and Behavioral Patterns of Only Children

1. Unrealistic Expectations of Marital Life

Because the parents of only children have not experienced parenting another child, they may prioritize all the wishes and needs of their sole child and satisfy those needs without limitation. The immediate fulfillment of all needs in the family of origin may create serious difficulties, particularly in the economic domain, after the beginning of married life. Such difficulties may be especially pronounced when the spouse of the only child has grown up in a large family, in which the needs of every child were not necessarily fulfilled. Participant 4 stated, "My wife does not pay any attention to the amount of my salary and constantly makes expensive demands. She believes that she experienced a higher standard of living in her family."

2. Maximum Parental Investment in Empowering the Child

Because an only child is the sole embodiment of the parents' aspirations, the parents may invest extensively in the child's education and development across athletic, academic, artistic, and other domains. This long-term investment may result in an individual who possesses a diverse range of highly developed capabilities by the time of marriage. The spouses of only children described this subtheme as a positive characteristic and stated that these abilities could have a favorable influence on their own children, who might view the parent who was an only child as a successful role model. Participant 2 stated, "When I married my husband, he had completed his language courses and knew how to play two musical instruments. Now my son has become exactly like his father, and I am very pleased about this."

3. Emotional Dependence on the Family of Origin

Some spouses of only children stated that their partners had deeply rooted emotional bonds with their parents, which sometimes exceeded conventional boundaries. From the perspectives of these spouses, the principal problem was not the relationship with the family of origin itself. Rather, the problem concerned the only child's inability to define married life as an independent, dyadic unit and the deliberate involvement of the parents in the marital relationship to resolve conflicts or fulfill a confidant role. Participant 7 stated, "Whenever we encounter a particular problem, my spouse inevitably involves the parents, as though this behavior is an inseparable part of my spouse's personality."

4. Deficiencies in Practical Marital-Life Skills

In some only-child families, parents may be so motivated by affection and protection that they provide insufficient opportunities for their child to learn and acquire practical life skills, particularly those required

to perform adult responsibilities within marital life. Such deficiencies may intensify marital difficulties after the beginning of married life. The spouses of only children stated that inadequate practical skills created a sense of inequality in the distribution of marital responsibilities and perpetuated the couple's dependence on the previous generation. Participant 1 stated, "After we married, my wife did not know how to cook, and for approximately seven months, my mother-in-law cooked for us." Participant 6 similarly stated, "My husband is not at all technically inclined and does not know how to perform repair work. I think this is because his father always did these tasks for him."

5. Superiority Beliefs Resulting From Child-Centered Parenting

Because only children may grow up with a high standard of living and extensive access to financial and welfare resources, they may develop a sense of superiority over others, particularly their peers. This sense of superiority may result from a family socialization system in which the individual encounters few limitations, limited competition, and little constructive frustration. Such superiority beliefs may persist until marriage and subsequently affect the individual's marital life. The spouses of only children stated that these feelings became more pronounced when the material resources available in the only child's family of origin were compared with those available in the spouse's larger family. Participant 8 stated, "Sometimes my husband uses the possessions and resources of his family against me and says that he had a much better life than I did."

Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to explore the lived experiences of spouses who were married to only children. The findings yielded three main themes: opportunities and facilitating factors associated with marriage to only children, challenges and pressures associated with this type of marriage, and the personality and behavioral patterns attributed to only-child spouses. The first theme included sustainable financial security and economic well-being, comprehensive parental support for the couple, full acceptance of the daughter-in-law or son-in-law as a core family member, and reduced exposure to inter-kinship conflict and competition. The second theme comprised pressure to have children, the absence of an extended kinship network for the couple's children, insufficient marital privacy, role-based expectations, parental separation anxiety and monitoring, and interference in child-rearing. The third theme included unrealistic marital expectations, intensive parental investment in the child's development, emotional dependence on the family of origin, deficiencies in practical life skills, and superiority beliefs associated with child-centered parenting. Overall, the results demonstrated that marriage to an only child cannot be evaluated through an exclusively positive or negative framework. Rather, it is characterized by a complex interaction between concentrated family resources, intensive emotional bonds, strong parental investment, limited kinship distribution, and challenges related to autonomy and family boundaries.

One of the most prominent findings concerned the economic security and material support experienced by the spouses of only children. Participants reported that the parents of only children frequently provided housing, wedding expenses, dowries, childcare, and other forms of financial assistance because their resources were not distributed among several children. This finding is consistent with the family resource dilution perspective, according to which parental financial, educational, and emotional resources decrease in proportion to the number of children among whom they must be divided. Wang and Feng showed that

children in smaller families may benefit from more concentrated educational and financial investment and that married only daughters may retain important forms of familial empowerment because parental resources are not dispersed among multiple offspring (10). The present findings extend this argument from childhood and education into marital life by showing that concentrated parental resources may continue to benefit the only child and the spouse after marriage. Financial support appears to reduce stress during the early stages of marriage and may provide the couple with access to housing, education, employment, and childcare opportunities that would otherwise be difficult to obtain.

The participants also described comprehensive parental assistance in domestic responsibilities and childcare. Parents of only children were perceived as highly available and willing to care for grandchildren, perform household tasks, and support the couple during illness, employment, or further education. Such involvement may be understood as an extension of the intensive parenting patterns that characterize many only-child families. Khadaroo and MacCallum found that parents of only children often develop close and highly invested relationships with their children, combining emotional intimacy with substantial practical involvement (8). Similarly, concentrated parental expectations and attention may result in high levels of support throughout the child's developmental trajectory (6). In the present study, this investment did not end when the child entered adulthood but was transferred to the marital household. Therefore, one of the important contributions of the findings is the demonstration that the benefits of intensive parenting may persist across the transition to marriage and may indirectly support the spouse as well.

Another positive experience was the full acceptance of the daughter-in-law or son-in-law as a central family member. Several participants believed that they had become emotional substitutes for the daughter or son whom the spouse's parents had never had. This substitution strengthened trust, intimacy, and inclusion and allowed the spouse to become involved in important family matters. From a family-systems perspective, this process may reflect the reorganization of family roles following marriage. Minuchin emphasized that families respond to developmental transitions by redefining boundaries and roles among subsystems (2). In only-child families, where there are fewer family members available to occupy adult relational roles, the entry of a daughter-in-law or son-in-law may have greater structural and emotional significance. This can strengthen the spouse's sense of belonging and reduce the marginalization that sometimes occurs in relationships between in-laws. Nevertheless, the same process may become problematic if emotional inclusion develops into excessive expectations or the erosion of marital boundaries.

The absence of sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law, co-sisters-in-law, and co-brothers-in-law was also perceived as an important advantage. Participants reported fewer comparisons, fewer conflicts over parental attention, and less competition for family resources or approval. This finding is logically consistent with the structural characteristics of only-child families because the absence of siblings eliminates several relational triangles and rivalries that may otherwise emerge in extended families. Bowen's family systems theory proposes that anxiety often circulates through triangular relationships, especially when tensions between two individuals are stabilized through the involvement of a third person (1). In multi-child families, alliances and comparisons among siblings and their spouses may create numerous opportunities for triangulation. In contrast, the simpler structure of only-child families may reduce some forms of relational complexity. The present findings therefore suggest that the absence of siblings-in-law is not merely a numerical absence but may be experienced as a meaningful reduction in interpersonal strain.

Despite these advantages, participants identified pressure to have children as a major challenge. The parents of only children were described as strongly motivated to ensure the continuation of the family lineage and frequently encouraged or pressured the couple to have children soon after marriage. This finding may be explained by the symbolic position of the only child as the sole route through which the family can continue biologically and socially. Parental expectations in only-child families are often concentrated because there are no other children with whom such expectations can be shared (7). Chiang also noted that parental expectations can simultaneously function as support and as pressure, depending on the intensity and manner in which they are expressed (6). In the present study, encouragement to have children was often accompanied by promises of financial and practical support, indicating that pressure and facilitation were intertwined. Although parents attempted to reduce the material burden of childbearing, the couple's reproductive autonomy could still be compromised by persistent expectations.

The absence of an extended kinship network for the couple's children was another important finding. Participants were concerned that their children would have fewer aunts, uncles, cousins, and family-based playmates and would consequently experience a restricted family environment. This result illustrates the intergenerational consequences of only-child family structures. The effects of being an only child do not necessarily end with that individual but may influence the social environment available to the next generation. Children born to only children may receive intensive attention from grandparents while simultaneously lacking a broad network of relatives. Previous research has shown that the family environment, marital relationship, and parenting patterns are interconnected and can influence children's psychological and physical development (12). The current findings add that the structural size of the family may also affect the range of social relationships available to grandchildren. However, the developmental implications of this narrower network should not be interpreted deterministically, because peer groups, schools, neighborhoods, and family friends may partly compensate for the absence of cousins and extended-family playmates.

A central challenge reported by the participants was the lack of privacy and the excessive sharing of marital affairs with the spouse's parents. Some participants stated that parents entered the couple's home without permission, expected to accompany them on trips, or assumed a legitimate role in decisions that would ordinarily belong to the marital subsystem. This finding closely aligns with structural family theory, which identifies clear boundaries as necessary for healthy functioning between the marital subsystem and the family of origin (2). In only-child families, boundaries may become diffuse when the parents experience the child's marriage as a threat to their emotional closeness or as a loss of their central family relationship. The issue is not parental involvement itself but the inability to distinguish supportive involvement from intrusion. When the couple cannot make independent decisions regarding residence, travel, privacy, or conflict resolution, the formation of an autonomous marital identity may be disrupted.

The findings concerning emotional dependence on the family of origin and parental involvement in marital conflicts further support this interpretation. Participants reported that only-child spouses frequently disclosed private marital matters to their parents and expected them to mediate disagreements. Cheng and Kuo found an association between triangulation and marital satisfaction in only-child families, suggesting that parental involvement in the couple's relationship may have significant consequences for marital functioning (9). Bowen's concept of differentiation also provides a useful explanation: individuals with lower

emotional differentiation may struggle to remain connected to their parents while maintaining independent judgment and commitment to the marital relationship (1). In the present study, emotional dependence was not interpreted as simple affection toward parents; rather, it became problematic when the only-child spouse was unable to preserve marital confidentiality or address disagreements directly with the partner.

Parental separation anxiety and continuous monitoring were similarly prominent. Participants described frequent calls, repeated requests for information about the couple's location and health, and persistent expressions of worry. Khadaroo and MacCallum observed that parents of only children may experience heightened concern about autonomy and safety because all parental attachment and responsibility are concentrated on one child (8). Such monitoring may originate in care and fear rather than in an explicit intention to control. Nevertheless, from the spouse's perspective, it may be experienced as surveillance, interruption, and interference. The findings thus demonstrate the importance of distinguishing the intentions of family members from the relational consequences of their behavior. Parental concern may be emotionally understandable, yet its continuous expression may reduce the couple's sense of independence and psychological peace.

The participants also reported role-based and duty-oriented expectations, including responsibility for assisting with family gatherings, maintaining frequent contact, and caring for aging or ill parents. Because there are no siblings with whom such duties can be shared, the only child and the spouse may carry the entire burden of intergenerational support. This may help explain the reported penalty associated with only-child status in marital matching. Kawata and Komura indicated that potential partners may consider the concentrated caregiving obligations attached to marrying an only child, even when such a marriage also provides access to concentrated family resources (11). The present findings show that this trade-off continues within marriage: economic benefits may coexist with substantial practical and emotional duties. The spouse may benefit from parental support in the early years but later become responsible for meeting all the needs of the spouse's parents.

Interference in child-rearing was another source of tension. Participants reported that grandparents spoiled grandchildren, provided excessive access to mobile phones or other resources, and disregarded parental rules. This behavior can be understood as a continuation of child-centered family patterns in which emotional and material investment is redirected from the only child to the grandchild. Although grandparental support may reduce the burden of childcare, excessive involvement can weaken parental authority and create inconsistent disciplinary environments. Chen and Zhou's findings regarding the relationships among marital satisfaction, maternal warmth, and child outcomes support the view that child development is embedded in the broader emotional climate of the family (12). When grandparents and parents apply conflicting rules, the child may learn to bypass parental boundaries, while conflict between the generations may also affect the marital relationship.

Regarding the personality and behavioral patterns attributed to only-child spouses, participants described both strengths and vulnerabilities. A major positive pattern was extensive parental investment in education, sports, languages, and artistic development. This result is consistent with evidence that only children may receive higher educational investment and more concentrated developmental opportunities (7, 10). These experiences may produce adults with diverse competencies, strong academic skills, and high levels of achievement. Importantly, this finding challenges simplistic stereotypes portraying only children as socially

or developmentally deficient. Polit and Falbo's quantitative review did not support the assumption that only children experience general personality disadvantages (3), and Foster and colleagues similarly found no reliable evidence that only children are more narcissistic than people with siblings (4). The current findings therefore reinforce the need for a balanced interpretation: only-child status may create distinct developmental conditions, but it does not inherently produce maladaptive personality traits.

At the same time, some participants attributed unrealistic marital expectations, poor practical skills, and superiority beliefs to the parenting environment of their only-child spouses. These perceptions may result from a family context in which needs were rapidly fulfilled, household duties were performed by parents, and the child had limited exposure to resource sharing or constructive frustration. Cai and colleagues argued that traits such as narcissism and self-enhancement should be interpreted socioculturally rather than attributed to a single structural factor such as sibling status (5). This perspective is important because the participants' interpretations reflect lived marital experiences but do not establish that all only children develop entitlement or superiority. Foster and colleagues' findings directly caution against equating only-child status with narcissism (4). It is more plausible that these patterns emerge when only-child status is combined with overindulgent, overprotective, or highly child-centered parenting. Therefore, family processes appear to be more influential than the mere absence of siblings.

The finding concerning deficiencies in practical marital-life skills may also be explained by excessive parental protection. When parents consistently perform domestic, technical, or decision-making tasks for their sole child, the child may have fewer opportunities to develop competence and responsibility. Khadaroo and MacCallum identified autonomy and independence as important concerns in the parenting of only children (8). The present findings suggest that limited autonomy during adolescence may have consequences after marriage, including unequal distribution of household duties and continued reliance on parents. However, such deficiencies are potentially modifiable and should not be considered fixed personality characteristics. Practical competencies can be developed through marital education, shared responsibility, and gradual reduction of parental overfunctioning.

Overall, the findings indicate that the lived experience of marriage to an only child is shaped by a fundamental paradox. The same concentration of family attention that produces economic support, educational opportunity, and emotional inclusion may also produce intrusive monitoring, unrealistic expectations, and difficulty establishing boundaries. The absence of siblings may reduce rivalry and competition but may intensify caregiving obligations and restrict the next generation's kinship network. These results support family-systems theories that emphasize the interdependence of family structure, emotional processes, boundaries, and developmental transitions (1, 2). They also demonstrate that common stereotypes are inadequate for understanding only children and their marriages. The marital consequences of only-child status depend substantially on parenting style, differentiation, socioeconomic resources, cultural expectations, and the family's ability to reorganize its boundaries after marriage.

This study had several limitations. First, the participants were limited to 11 spouses of only children living in Isfahan, and the findings may not fully represent the experiences of couples in other regions, cultures, or socioeconomic groups. Second, most participants were women, which may have resulted in greater representation of wives' experiences and insufficient attention to the perspectives of husbands married to only-child women. Third, the findings were based exclusively on the accounts of spouses and did not include

interviews with the only-child partners or their parents; therefore, the interpretations reflect one position within a complex family system. Fourth, some participants may have attributed marital difficulties to only-child status even when those difficulties were influenced by personality, economic conditions, gender-role expectations, or general in-law relationships. Finally, the retrospective and self-reported nature of the interviews may have been affected by selective recall, current marital satisfaction, and participants' willingness to disclose sensitive family experiences.

Future studies should investigate the experiences of more diverse samples, including couples from different cities, rural areas, cultural groups, socioeconomic levels, and lengths of marriage. Researchers should recruit more male participants and compare the experiences of men married to only-child women with those of women married to only-child men. Dyadic studies involving both spouses would provide a more balanced understanding of the relationship, while the inclusion of parents could clarify how support, anxiety, and involvement are interpreted across generations. Comparative research should examine marriages involving two only children, one only child, and partners who both have siblings. Longitudinal designs could assess how economic support, parental involvement, caregiving responsibilities, and marital boundaries change from the beginning of marriage to parenthood and later adulthood. Quantitative studies could also develop and validate instruments for measuring the specific opportunities and pressures identified in the present research.

Premarital counselors and family therapists should help couples discuss the distinctive expectations associated with marriage to an only child before major conflicts emerge. Counseling should address financial support and the influence it may give parents, expectations regarding residence and frequent contact, responsibility for caring for aging parents, fertility pressure, childcare arrangements, confidentiality of marital conflicts, and boundaries concerning unannounced visits or shared travel. Couples should be encouraged to preserve supportive relationships with parents while defining the marital relationship as an autonomous decision-making unit. Only-child spouses may benefit from training in practical household skills, conflict resolution, emotional differentiation, and balanced responsibility, while parents can be guided to replace intrusive monitoring with respectful support. Practitioners should avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes and should instead assess the actual parenting patterns, family boundaries, resources, and relational behaviors of each family.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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