

# Designing a Model of Marital Success Based on the Lived Experiences of Couples

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## ABSTRACT

Marriage, as a social institution with a vital role in individual well-being and societal stability, requires a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of successful couples. This study, aiming to design and validate a culturally grounded model of marital success within the Iranian context based on the lived experiences of successful couples, seeks to fill the existing research gap. This research was conducted using an exploratory mixed-methods design. In the qualitative phase, grounded theory was applied through semi-structured interviews with 16 successful couples in Mashhad. Data were analyzed using open, axial, and selective coding. In the quantitative phase, the resulting conceptual model was converted into a researcher-developed questionnaire, and its validity and reliability were assessed. Subsequently, the questionnaire was administered to 382 couples in Mashhad, and the data were analyzed using structural equation modeling. The qualitative analysis led to the identification of the core category of "successful marriage as a transparent and unambiguous marital relationship." The model consists of six main dimensions: causal conditions (e.g., sense of freedom and open communication), contextual conditions (e.g., love and sexual satisfaction), intervening conditions (e.g., adaptation to parental roles), strategies (e.g., personal growth and conflict management), and consequences (e.g., flourishing and sense of peace). The quantitative results also confirmed the good fit of the proposed model. Marital success is a dynamic and multidimensional process rooted in transparency, mutual respect, and the simultaneous growth of both partners. The proposed model can serve as a practical framework for family counselors, couple therapists, and young couples to strengthen the foundations of marital life and prevent potential problems.

**Keywords:** Marital success model, lived experiences, successful couples, mixed-methods research, grounded theory.

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## Introduction

Marriage is universally recognized as one of the most fundamental social institutions, serving as the cornerstone of both individual well-being and societal stability. Across cultures and historical contexts, it provides emotional fulfillment, economic cooperation, and the continuity of family systems. However, while marriage offers significant protective factors for health and social integration, it also encounters diverse challenges that can affect its stability and success (1). In contemporary psychology and family research, the concept of *marital success* has emerged as a multidimensional construct, encompassing relational

satisfaction, intimacy, mutual respect, and the ability to adapt to stressors over time (2). Understanding the predictors of a successful marriage, particularly from culturally grounded perspectives, has become a central concern for researchers, clinicians, and policymakers.

Scholarly attempts to conceptualize and define marital success span a wide range of approaches, from psychological and behavioral models to sociocultural and religious frameworks. Research in Western contexts often emphasizes marital satisfaction and stability as central indicators (3). Nevertheless, marital success transcends subjective satisfaction; it also entails long-term commitment, adaptive coping strategies, and emotional regulation between partners (4). The dynamic processes that underlie successful marital adjustment include the regulation of emotions, the management of conflict, and the preservation of intimacy (5). These processes, as empirical findings confirm, differ across cultural and religious settings, suggesting that the concept of a “successful marriage” must be studied within localized cultural frameworks (2, 6).

In the Iranian and Islamic cultural context, marriage has historically been perceived not only as a personal contract but also as a social and spiritual commitment. Scholars argue that the essence of marital success here is deeply intertwined with moral, cultural, and religious values (7). Accordingly, models developed in Western societies may not capture the complexity of successful marriages in non-Western contexts, where family dynamics, collective responsibilities, and community expectations play a prominent role (8). These differences necessitate culturally tailored research that both validates universal components of marital success and reveals culture-specific factors (9, 10).

The role of communication has repeatedly been emphasized in the literature as a central determinant of marital well-being. Open dialogue, emotional expression, and active listening are regarded as essential components in fostering intimacy and reducing relational ambiguity (11). Studies demonstrate that couples who maintain transparent communication are more likely to sustain satisfaction and resolve conflicts constructively (12, 13). Beyond communication, emotional rights and mutual respect form the psychological foundations of marital harmony (14). The failure to establish such foundations often predicts relational breakdown and tendencies toward separation or divorce (15).

Qualitative inquiries have provided unique insights into the lived experiences of happily married couples. For instance, phenomenological studies show that long-term satisfied partners attribute their success to acceptance, patience, and shared rituals (16-18). Similarly, Iranian research highlights contextual conditions such as financial transparency, sexual satisfaction, and mutual appreciation as essential determinants (6, 19). Yet, despite the existence of numerous studies, there remains no consensus on a unified framework that integrates psychological, sociocultural, and behavioral factors into a comprehensive model.

Cultural comparisons demonstrate that marital arrangements also shape expectations. Research on arranged versus love-based marriages suggests that commitment dynamics may differ, yet satisfaction and stability can be achieved in both contexts if mutual respect and adaptive behaviors are cultivated (20). These findings underscore that marital success is less about the form of marriage and more about the processes of negotiation, adaptation, and shared meaning-making within the relationship (21).

Several Iranian scholars have developed indigenous frameworks for marital success. For instance, qualitative research by Derakhsh and colleagues formulated categories such as emotional security, respect, and value alignment as integral elements (9). Similarly, Hashemi Golmehri and colleagues advanced a model that highlights both relational strategies and contextual factors (10). More recently, Nikooy et al. identified

key criteria for marital success through grounded theory, emphasizing the dynamic interaction of individual, relational, and cultural components (22). Complementary studies have also drawn attention to religious exemplars as sources of marital guidance (7). Despite these contributions, the literature still reflects fragmentation and the need for integrative paradigms that can both explain and predict marital outcomes across varying contexts.

Empirical research has additionally illuminated the mediating role of psychological variables. For example, cognitive flexibility and self-differentiation have been shown to predict marital satisfaction and success, with emotion regulation acting as a mediator (23, 24). Such findings align with broader psychological theories that emphasize the regulation of affective processes in maintaining relational stability (4). Furthermore, sociocultural research highlights the importance of family systems and extended kinship networks in shaping marital roles and expectations (25). This systemic view suggests that successful marriage cannot be understood in isolation from broader familial and social structures.

Longitudinal and cross-cultural studies add further nuance to the discussion. Karney and Bradbury highlighted that conventional predictors such as socioeconomic status, education, and early relationship satisfaction may not always reliably forecast long-term stability, thereby challenging assumptions in the field (1). Fincham and colleagues similarly described marriage as a transformative process, where couples co-construct shared narratives and develop adaptive strategies over time (3). This dynamic perspective resonates with Iranian findings, where marriage is seen as an evolving journey requiring ongoing adaptation (26, 27).

Other studies emphasize the risk factors that threaten marital stability. For example, tendencies toward divorce often stem from lack of appreciation, sexual dissatisfaction, or unresolved conflicts (15). Emotional disengagement and absence of mutual support are likewise detrimental (21). On the other hand, protective factors such as shared spirituality, family dinners, and positive communication routines foster resilience in marital relationships (8, 18). Moreover, the literature consistently shows that successful marriages contribute positively to mental health, life satisfaction, and intergenerational stability (2, 6).

Intervention-based research has explored educational and therapeutic strategies to enhance marital outcomes. Studies in Iran comparing different approaches indicate that training in marital success frameworks significantly improves couples' decision-making and satisfaction levels (28-30). Similarly, Jokar and colleagues proposed a comprehensive model governing successful marriages that integrates personal, relational, and cultural dimensions (31). These findings provide practical implications for premarital education, counseling, and policy initiatives aimed at strengthening family foundations.

In parallel, global perspectives confirm the importance of continuous learning within marriage. Phenomenological studies of long-term married individuals identify lifelong growth, acceptance of differences, and personal development as recurring themes (16, 17). Communication patterns, problem-solving skills, and ritualized practices are highlighted as mechanisms that preserve intimacy and shared meaning (5, 12). Such insights suggest that successful marriage should be approached not as a static state but as an evolving process influenced by multiple interacting factors.

Interestingly, even outside psychology, the metaphor of marriage is used to describe successful integration of diverse components, as seen in technical fields such as material sciences where it symbolizes the blending of quality and cost-effectiveness (32). This metaphor underscores the universal resonance of the marital

construct in representing balance, harmony, and synergy. In family science, this translates into the integration of emotional, psychological, and sociocultural domains to achieve sustainable marital harmony.

Taken together, the reviewed literature highlights both commonalities and divergences in conceptualizations of marital success. Universal elements such as communication, intimacy, and respect appear across contexts, while culturally specific factors—including religious values, extended family roles, and societal expectations—shape marital trajectories in unique ways (6, 13). Yet, despite extensive research, gaps remain regarding how these diverse elements interact in specific cultural environments like Iran. Moreover, most available models either emphasize micro-level psychological variables or macro-level cultural influences without sufficiently integrating them.

The present study seeks to design and validate a culturally grounded paradigmatic model of marital success derived from the lived experiences of successful Iranian couples.

## Methods and Materials

This study was conducted using a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design. The design included two main phases: first, a qualitative phase to explore the dimensions of the phenomenon and to develop a theory, followed by a quantitative phase to test and validate the resulting theory.

In the qualitative phase, the grounded theory method with the systematic approach of Strauss and Corbin (1998) was employed. The research population in this phase consisted of successful couples residing in the city of Mashhad. Sampling began purposefully and theoretically and continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Ultimately, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 couples (32 individuals) who met the inclusion criteria (at least 5 years of marriage, high marital satisfaction, and being in their first marriage). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed through the three-stage coding process of open, axial, and selective coding. To enhance the credibility of the findings, member checking and peer review by experts were used.

In the quantitative phase, based on the conceptual model extracted from the qualitative phase, a researcher-made questionnaire was developed. After its face and content validity were confirmed by experts, the final questionnaire was administered to a sample of 382 couples from different areas of Mashhad. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS software for descriptive analyses and AMOS software for structural equation modeling to test the fit of the proposed model.

## Findings and Results

Through qualitative data analysis, the core category of the study, entitled “*successful marriage as a transparent and unambiguous marital relationship*”, was identified. This category indicates that the essence of a successful marriage, from the participants’ perspective, lies in creating a space of clarity, honesty, and openness in which no ambiguity or hidden secrets threaten the relationship. The final paradigmatic model explaining this phenomenon includes the following dimensions (Figure 1):

**Causal Conditions:** Factors that directly lead to the emergence of the main phenomenon (transparent relationship). These conditions include:

*Sense of freedom:* Encompassing the freedom to maintain values, pursue personal interests, continue education, and engage in employment without pressure from the spouse.

*Acceptance of personality differences:* Understanding and accepting the partner's unique traits, even if unpleasant, without attempting to forcefully change them.

*Mutual understanding:* The ability to comprehend the partner's inner world, emotions, and needs, even when they are not explicitly expressed.

*Open and candid dialogue:* The existence of honest communication for expressing desires, needs, and both positive and negative emotions transparently.

**Contextual Conditions:** The background and setting in which the phenomenon occurs. These conditions include:

*Love and affection:* The presence of a deep emotional bond formed before or during married life and sustained over time.

*Sexual satisfaction:* Experiencing a fulfilling sexual relationship based on mutual understanding of needs and intimacy.

*Transparency in financial matters:* Honesty and agreement in managing the family's economic affairs.

*Appreciation of the spouse:* Valuing the spouse's efforts and affection both verbally and behaviorally.

*Acquisition of new couple skills:* A willingness to learn and continuously grow through reading or attending workshops.

**Intervening Conditions:** Factors that influence couples' strategies, either facilitating or hindering the process. These conditions include:

*Adaptation to parental roles:* Successfully managing the challenges arising from childbirth and division of responsibilities.

*Marital conflicts:* The existence of disagreements and how they are managed.

*Expectations of families of origin:* Pressures or support from the families of origin.

**Strategies:** Actions and interactions couples employ to manage the phenomenon and achieve desired outcomes. These strategies include:

*Personal growth:* Each partner's effort toward individual development and realization of personal potential.

*Supporting the spouse:* Providing emotional and practical support to the partner, especially during difficult times.

*Creating shared couple rituals:* Developing unique traditions and rituals to strengthen couple identity.

*Managing conflicts:* Using constructive approaches to resolve disagreements.

*Maintaining the marital relationship:* Conscious efforts to preserve boundaries and enhance intimacy.

**Consequences:** The results and achievements of successfully applying these strategies, which include:

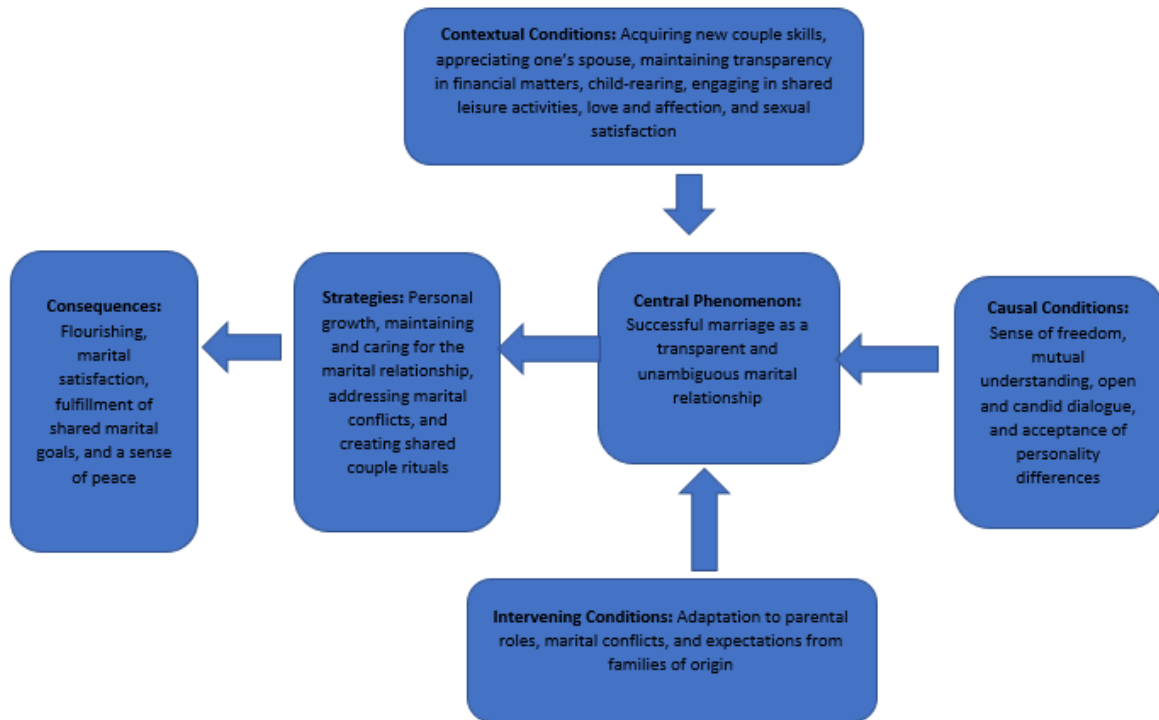
*Flourishing:* Experiencing individual growth and development alongside one another.

*Sense of peace:* Feeling psychological and emotional security within the relationship.

*Achievement of shared goals:* Attaining financial and family objectives.

*Marital satisfaction:* Experiencing contentment and overall satisfaction with married life, showing an upward trajectory.

In the figure below, the paradigmatic model of successful marriage is presented:



**Figure 1. Paradigmatic model of successful marriage**

Based on the above analyses, the conceptual model of marital success was developed. In this model, couples, influenced by causal conditions and within the context of background conditions, with the intervention of mediating factors, employ specific strategies to move toward positive individual and marital outcomes. The core of this process is transparency in the relationship.

The results of structural equation modeling analysis showed that the conceptual model of the study had an excellent fit with the collected data. Model fit indices (e.g., RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.98, GFI = 0.97, and AGFI = 0.93) were all within the acceptable range. These findings confirm that the structure and relationships between the variables identified in the qualitative phase are also significantly valid in the larger sample (Table 1), and that the model possesses the necessary validity to explain marital success in the studied population.

**Table 1: Results of Path Analysis and Hypothesis Testing**

Path	Standardized Coefficient	Significance Level (p)	Result
Causal conditions → Strategies	0.45	>0.01	Confirmed
Contextual conditions → Strategies	0.52	>0.01	Confirmed
Intervening conditions → Strategies	-0.21	>0.05	Confirmed (negative effect)
Strategies → Consequences	0.78	>0.01	Confirmed

## Discussion and Conclusion

The present study aimed to design and validate a paradigmatic model of marital success grounded in the lived experiences of successful Iranian couples. The findings of the qualitative phase identified “marriage as a transparent and unambiguous marital relationship” as the core category, which integrates causal conditions, contextual factors, intervening conditions, strategies, and consequences. The quantitative phase confirmed the model through structural equation modeling, indicating excellent fit indices (RMSEA = 0.06,

CFI = 0.98, GFI = 0.97, AGFI = 0.93). These results highlight that successful marriage is a multidimensional construct, shaped by both individual and relational processes within a sociocultural context.

The emphasis on transparency as the essence of a successful marriage resonates with the literature emphasizing open dialogue, honesty, and emotional clarity. Hormozi and colleagues identified communication actions, such as candid dialogue and emotional expression, as central to successful marriages (11). Similarly, Timothy-Springer and Johnson underscored the importance of shared narratives and open conversations in sustaining marital satisfaction (12). This finding also supports Fincham and colleagues' conceptualization of marriage as a transformative process, where transparent interactions allow couples to navigate challenges effectively (3). In line with these findings, Yoo et al. showed that midlife couples who valued openness and clear communication reported higher levels of marital satisfaction (13).

The identified causal conditions—such as sense of freedom, acceptance of personality differences, mutual understanding, and open communication—are consistent with earlier qualitative and phenomenological research. For example, Grundland found that long-term happily married individuals often pointed to mutual respect and acceptance as key ingredients of marital longevity (16). Similarly, Nimtz reported that partners in long-term marriages emphasized freedom to pursue personal growth and acceptance of individual differences as predictors of satisfaction (17). Dixon's work on Christian couples also demonstrated that spirituality combined with acceptance of individuality contributed to enduring marriages (18). These studies collectively support the present study's finding that transparent communication and respect for individuality underpin marital success.

The contextual conditions identified in this study—love, sexual satisfaction, financial transparency, appreciation, and acquisition of couple skills—reflect widely recognized components of marital success in prior research. Butzer and Campbell highlighted sexual satisfaction as a robust predictor of long-term relational stability (5). Likewise, Zaheri et al. found that Iranian couples and experts emphasized love, intimacy, and sexual satisfaction as core aspects of successful marriage (6). Financial transparency as a contextual factor also aligns with Elgar et al.'s findings that routine family practices such as shared meals and open discussion of family matters promote relational health (8). In addition, the recognition of appreciation echoes Afrooz's emphasis on mutual emotional rights as psychological foundations of marital relationships (14). These findings confirm that the cultural model of marital success incorporates universal elements while adapting them to the Iranian context.

The intervening conditions, including adaptation to parental roles, family expectations, and marital conflicts, demonstrate how external and systemic factors influence marital processes. These findings parallel Sahebald et al.'s study, which identified family expectations and kinship influences as mediators of marital satisfaction (25). They also echo Moltafet and Ahadi's conclusion that conflict mismanagement and family pressures increase tendencies toward divorce (15). The recognition of family-of-origin influences also supports Hussain's cross-cultural research, which showed that both arranged and love-based marriages are strongly shaped by the involvement and expectations of families (20).

The strategies identified in this study—personal growth, spousal support, shared rituals, conflict resolution, and relational maintenance—are strongly supported in the literature. Khojastehmehr and Mohammadi found that happiness in stable marriages stems from couples' shared efforts to create routines, maintain intimacy, and invest in the relationship (26). Jokar and colleagues highlighted that effective conflict

resolution and ongoing support are central to a comprehensive model of successful marriages (31). Similarly, Pirsaghi and colleagues emphasized spousal support and appreciation as critical indicators of effective marital relationships (21). These parallels suggest that the strategies identified here are robust across both Iranian and international studies.

The consequences of successful marital strategies identified in this study—flourishing, sense of peace, achievement of shared goals, and marital satisfaction—are also consistent with previous research. Karimisani et al. identified flourishing and personal development as important outcomes of marital harmony (27). Nikooy and colleagues also found that Iranian couples define successful marriage in terms of growth and shared goal achievement (22). Internationally, Gross and Thompson's theoretical model of emotion regulation underscores that successful emotional management within marriage fosters peace and well-being (4). The convergence of these findings suggests that the conceptualization of marital outcomes in this study is theoretically and empirically valid.

The quantitative validation of the proposed model adds further strength to its applicability. The excellent fit indices reported here are consistent with previous Iranian studies that validated models of marital success using structural equation modeling. For example, Salehi et al. confirmed the role of cognitive flexibility, self-differentiation, and emotion regulation in predicting successful marriage, with their model also demonstrating strong fit indices (23, 24). Similarly, Khanbani and colleagues found that marital training interventions improved couple decision-making, with quantitative evidence supporting their models (28-30). Together, these findings affirm the reliability and cultural validity of the present model.

The results also contribute to bridging cultural and global perspectives on marital success. Karney and Bradbury challenged conventional predictors, showing that long-term stability is not solely explained by demographic factors (1). The present study supports this view by emphasizing relational transparency and strategies rather than static demographic variables. Moreover, the identified role of continuous learning in marital life aligns with Timothy-Springer's findings that successful couples adapt through shared experiences and growth (12). The metaphor of "marriage as integration," seen in Butt's work on material sciences, reflects this same principle of balancing diverse elements for sustained harmony (32).

In summary, the findings of this study align strongly with previous research across cultural contexts while offering unique insights into the Iranian setting. Transparency, open communication, and shared growth emerge as the universal core, while contextual influences such as family expectations and financial transparency reflect culturally specific dimensions. The integration of qualitative lived experiences with quantitative validation provides a robust model that can inform both theory and practice in family psychology.

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the qualitative data were drawn from a specific cultural and geographical context, namely married couples in Mashhad, Iran. While the findings reflect important cultural insights, they may not fully generalize to other Iranian regions with different social norms or to non-Iranian contexts. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the quantitative phase limits the ability to infer causal relationships. Longitudinal designs would provide stronger evidence regarding the temporal stability of the identified factors. Third, self-report measures were used in the survey phase, which are susceptible to social desirability and recall bias. Couples may have underreported conflicts or exaggerated positive experiences due to cultural sensitivities. Finally, while the study integrated qualitative

and quantitative phases, the complexity of marital dynamics suggests that further triangulation with observational or physiological data would enhance validity.

Future research should expand the sample beyond Mashhad to include diverse regions of Iran and international comparisons to examine the cultural specificity and universality of the proposed model. Longitudinal studies would allow researchers to capture the developmental trajectories of marital success over time, particularly during key transitions such as parenthood or retirement. Moreover, future work should integrate mixed-methods approaches that include not only interviews and surveys but also direct behavioral observations and diary studies to capture real-time marital processes. Another fruitful direction would be to examine how digital communication technologies influence marital transparency and conflict resolution, given their increasing role in couples' daily interactions. Finally, intervention studies that apply the identified model in premarital education and marital therapy could provide practical validation of its effectiveness in improving relational outcomes.

The findings of this study hold several implications for practice. Counselors and family therapists can use the proposed model as a framework for assessing relational strengths and vulnerabilities, guiding interventions to promote transparency, communication, and shared growth. Educational programs for young couples could incorporate modules on financial transparency, emotional expression, and adaptive conflict management to strengthen marital foundations. Policy initiatives may also benefit from integrating these insights into premarital counseling requirements, emphasizing relational skills rather than demographic compatibility alone. Finally, the model offers practical guidance for couples themselves, encouraging them to prioritize openness, mutual respect, and the creation of shared rituals as pathways to sustained marital satisfaction and flourishing.

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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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