Investigating Couples' Interactive Patterns at Three Stages of the Family Life Cycle

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Abstract

Introduction: This study aims to investigate the couples' interaction patterns at three stages of family life cycle including couples without children, childbearing families and families with adolescent children.
Method: This study is a qualitative research with a phenomenology method. Using purposive sampling, 28 couples were selected from Yazd (20-50 year old couples). The required data was collected through designed scenarios using in-depth semi-structured interview and the Marital Adjustment Test. To analyze the data, the seven-stage Colaizzi model was imitated.
Results: Totally, 12 components of negative interaction patterns were identified including defensiveness, criticism, anger, gender rules, belligerence, family contempt, contempt, domineering, tense humor, contempt for her/himself, sadness and retreat. Positive interaction codes included cautious behavior, interest in the relation, validation, affection, humor, surprise, self-disclosure, seeing themselves as a unit, sense of humor, emotion management, and normalization. The findings indicate significant differences in the amount of usage, form, purpose and verbal manifestation of these components in each of the stages.
Conclusion: It can be stated that different life cycle stages have certain features that can make an impact on the couples' interaction patterns.

Keywords: Interaction Patterns, Life Cycle, Couples, Qualitative Method

Introduction

Statistics released by various communities have indicated a big rise in divorce in recent years [1, 2]. Many researchers have focused on this problem to identify the contributing factors in the stability of marriage [3].

Communication is one of the key variables to explain the satisfaction and stability of marital life [4, 5]. Efficient communication reduces the risk of divorce, predicts marital satisfaction and prevents its gradual reduction over time as well [4, 6]. In contrast, intertwined and maladjusted relationships between couples decrease marital satisfaction and are also reversely related to physical health [7-10]. Researchers have found interaction patterns of adjusted and maladjusted couples to be different [11].

Sillars and Shellen [12] focused on some features of the couple's communication such as linguistic complexity, the frequency of using personal pronouns or plural words, denial or confirmation words, coded conversations and forgotten messages. According to their findings, culture [13] is regarded as the most important factor affecting the form and content of communication. However, a combination of factors can have effects these linguistic features of couples' interaction patterns [12]. Some of these factors including couples' age, length of marriage, etc., are linked to dynamism of the family system passing

through developmental stages. Consequently, it seems that these interaction patterns are influenced by "family life cycle" [14].

The family life cycle is a term that is used in reference to the succession of critical stages through which a typical family passes. Duvall's widely-cited model defined family development in terms of eight developmental stages: (1) married couple without children, (2) childbearing families with the oldest child between birth and 30 months, (3) families with preschool children, (4) families with school-age children, (5) families with adolescent children, (6) launching families (first to last child is leaving home), (7) middle-age families ("empty nest" to retirement), and (8) aging families (retirement to death of both spouses).

When the family passes through these stages, it undergoes significant changes influencing the marital stability and satisfaction, and even divorce [14-16].

The overall frequency and prioritization of conflicts as well as interaction patterns of couples in conflicting situations change as couples pass through the developmental stages of life [15, 17]. Disagreement with the spouse during conflicting discussions in people who were married a long time ago is observed less than young couples. Also, self-disclosure, tendency to expressive communication [18] and feeling expression [19] experience a decline with age. A rise in marital satisfaction of older couples is the consequence of changes of interaction patterns over time. Older couples compared with middle-aged couples show less anger, hatred and hostility, expressing more affection. However, the expression of interest and sense of humor are more observed in the middle-aged couples [20].

Hence, observing and investigating couples' interaction patterns in each of these stages can help us to better understand why and how marital satisfaction, maladjustments and divorce statistics changes over time.

On the one hand, the stages of childbearing families and families with adolescent children take on significant importance due to wide changes occurring in the structure, roles and relations of the family [21].

Increase, decrease or change in the roles of family system produce effects on frequency, intensity, quality and content of family's transitions. When a family is remodeled from a two–member system to a three – member one and couples become parents, a significant drop is often observed in their relations quality [22-24]. Similarly, children's transition into the adolescence stage is associated with revising the identity and role of children that can cause major changes in the family and affect the quality of family interactions. Biological, cognitive and social changes of adolescence make the family system unstable, and may have a negative indirect impact on marital relationships [16, 25].

Although many studies have examined couples' interaction, few of them have taken its relation with family life cycle into consideration. In addition, given the role of culture in interaction patterns, it was necessary to explore this subject by using qualitative method. However, in Iran, the number of qualitative researches which have investigated couples' interaction is limited in number.

Therefore, in order to comprehend the interaction pattern of Iranian couples and design the appropriate interventions to improve the quality of their relationship, this study has aimed to investigate and compare couples' interaction patterns in three stages of the life cycle :1) couples without children, 2) childbearing families, and 3) families with adolescent children.

Method

This study was a qualitative research using the phenomenological approach. The statistical population of this study included three groups of couples (20-50 year old residing in Yazd). 1) Couples without children (couples who have married in recent 1-3 years, and still do not have children), 2) childbearing families with the oldest child between birth and 30 months, and 3) families with adolescent children (from 13 to 20 years old of the eldest child).

Using purposive sampling, three sample groups were selected as follows: to invite couples to participate in the research, public notices were distributed in the city of Yazd. Couples who were willing to participate in this study were recruited as they met the research criteria. The inclusion criteria of this research included: being within the age of 18-25, desiring to participate in the research, and obtaining the scores higher than the cut-off point in the Marital Adjustment Test.

Furthermore, assessments were done to rule out the exclusion criteria including substance dependence disorder, or psychotic disorders and other axis I and axis II disorders; infertility problem or a history of infidelity among couples.

After conducting interviews with nine couples in the first group, nine couples in the second group, and ten couples in the third group, the sampling process ended as data were saturated. The participants were examined with the following tools:

Structured Diagnostic Interview for (SCID) DSM-IV:

The SCID is a semi-structured interview based on DSM-IV. It has two main versions: SCID-I which assesses the mental disorders of Axis 1, and SCID-II which is used to diagnose the personality disorders in axis 2.

Several studies have indicated its favorable reliability and validity [26]. The diagnostic agreement of the Persian version of SCID has been reported above 0.6, the total agreement for all of the current diagnoses has been reported 0.52. The Persian version of SCID is a reliable measure for clinical diagnosis, research and training purposes [27].

Marital Adjustment Test (MAT): Locke and Wallace designed a 15-item test to assess marital adjustment. Due to its history and widespread use, it is used as a benchmark standard for assessing the adjustment in marriage. This Scale should be completed by each of the couples separately. The scores can range from 2 to 158 and the average score is 110 for men, and 108 for women. Scores of 100 and higher generally indicate marital satisfaction, and scores below 100 indicate problem in marital relations. MAT has shown the validity of 0.90 using

split-half method. The validity of this test (Cronbach's alpha) in Iranian samples has been varied from 0.81 to 0.89 [28, 29].

Semi-structured In-depth Interviews: Required information about couples' interaction patterns were obtained by designed tasks and scenarios through semi-structured in-depth interview.

Interview has been known as the main method of collecting data in phenomenological study. These interviews first start with general questions that allow people to freely express their experiences and continue by explorative statements and probing, these lead to deepening the interviews to access rich data based on the responses of participants [30].

In first interview session, the process of research was explained to couples and their informed consent was obtained. Then the couple, separately, completed "the list of marital problems" form that asked them to write 10 cases of their marital problems in order of priority for the first task). Each couple also received a form to write down the title of some good memories in their marital life (for the third task).

When the forms were completed by couples three tasks were administered. The first task (problem solving) includes four stages. First, the couples discussed a problem propounded by both of them and its probable solutions. Secondly, they discussed about one of the past conflicting issues, and the way of dealing with it (5 minutes). Then the researcher propounded a scenario about one of the conflicting areas specified by the couples, and they are asked to exchange views on this scenario.

In the second task (decision-making and the apportionment of responsibilities), the couples were asked to make some decisions about holding a party. Next, the couples were required to discuss about an important situation in the past that involved decision making or the current situation on which they should decide.

In the third task, the couples had about 10 minutes to talk about a shared good memory (review of good memory). In order to follow moral principles, the tasks were arranged in a way that couples finish tasks by reviewing good memories.

Results

The average age of group 1, 2 and 3 were 25.16, 26.83, and 40.65 respectively. The average length of marriage in these three groups were 1.90, 3.41 and 18.01 respectively.

Totally, 12 negative interaction codes, and 11 positive interaction codes were identified in this study. Ten codes of 12 negative codes, and seven codes of 11 positive codes identified in this study were similar to Iranian Couples Interaction Coding System (ICICS) [29]. Negative codes included defensiveness, criticism, anger, gender rules, belligerence, family contempt, contempt, domineering, tense humor, contempt for her/himself, and sadness. "Retreat" is also a negative code that has been introduced in this study.

Positive interaction codes included: cautious behavior, interest in the relation, validation, affection, humor, surprise, self-disclosure, seeing themselves as a unit, sense of humor, emotion management, and normalization.

The components of negative and positive interaction patterns were compared in the three groups.

As seen in Tables 1 and 2, the component of "defensiveness" was observed in all three stages, but its dominant manifestation was different at each stage. In group 1, this component was observed in the form of "Yes... but" and "devaluation of the issue" accompanied by phrases indicating denial (maybe I am wrong ...) or the phrases restricting the effect of sentences (sometimes, perhaps, I guess), which was the indicator of cautious behavior.

Stubbornness, blaming each other, mutual complaint, exaggeration and changing the subject of complaint were the dominant manifestations of defensiveness in group 2 and were often accompanied with a component of domineering-expectation (66.7%). In group 3, defensiveness was observed in the form of blaming the opposite party and early apologizing instead of accepting the mistake, accompanied by retreat component in most cases (62.5%).

The greatest amount of criticism and conflict was seen in group 2 and the lowest was seen in group 3. In Group 1, the small codes or behavior (Level 2) identified the "Criticism- conflict", including making excuses and negative mind reading. Negative mind reading in group 1 was related to issues for which there is no previous history or evidence. Criticism in this stage was accompanied by the repetition and explanation of matter as well as using different words with the same meanings or similar words with different meanings.

Negative mind reading was also seen in group 2. However in this group, it was related to the issues that couples had faced before or had been the subject of couples' conflict. Criticism in group 1 (75%) was often associated with cautious behavior. criticism in group 2 was often associated with domineering- expectation and in group 3, it was often (67%) associated with retreat component.

Gender rules in group 1 often appeared in the form of prejudice against the roles and characteristics of female – male. In group 2 they were often manifested in the form of dos – don'ts. Gender rules in group 3 was not seen.

Belligerence (the behaviors which make the opposite party angry) and tense humor was not observed in group 1. Unpleasant humor occurred in the couple's conversations in this stage, but was immediately corrected by themselves.

Family contempt was more seen in group 1 in comparison with group 2. In group of (adjusted) couples with adolescent child, criticism of spouse's family was rarely observed and it was just seen among women.

Contempt in group 1 was more seen in the form of blame. However, in groups 2 and 3, it was also observed in the form of sarcasm.

Domineering was observed more in group 2, compared with groups 1 and 3."Retreat" was a component of negative interaction pattern in couples of group 3 which was manifested in the form of denying the problem, attributing the problem to his/her personality or belief about unchangeability of problem as well as the immediate retreat after propounding the problem (avoidance of continuing the discussion). Self-insult and sadness were seen in all three stages and no differences were observed.

The comparison of components of positive interaction in the three stages of the life cycle patterns have been presented in Table 3.

As Table 3 shows, cautious behavior, interest in the relation, affection, self-disclosure and a sense of humor had the highest frequency in group 1, and had gradually reduced in groups 2 and 3.

"Validation" in group 1 was in the form of repeating the opposite party's talk with one's own words (not by repeating the spouse's words) and in form of long interpretive sentences. In group 2, validation included "understanding and acceptance" manifested in confirming short sentences (such as right, oh, i admit, etc.), reciting the conversation with the spouse's words, listening and nodding the head, accepting the couple's point of view while apologizing, and completing each other's sentences.

Table 1. Comparison of Codes or Components of Negative Interaction Patterns in Three Stages of Family Life Cycle

Families with teenagers		Childbearing families		Couples without children	
Defensiveness	Blame the opposite party	Defensiveness	Stubbornness	Defensiveness	Yes... but
	Devaluation of the issue		Blame each other		
	Denial of issue		Mutual complaint		
	Attributing the issue to own personality		Exaggeration and change the subject of complaint		Devaluation of the issue
	Belief about unchangeability of problem				
Criticism	Complain	Criticism	Complaints List	Criticism / Conflict	Making excuses
			Negative mind reading		
			Complaining		Negative mind reading
			All-or-nothing thinking		
Anger	Restless talk	Anger	Direct anger	Anger	Restless talk
	Emphasize and pressure in talking		High tone of voice		
	Direct anger		Emphasizing and pressure in speech		Emphasizing and pressure of speech
		Gender rules	Should - should not	Gender rules	Prejudice
belligerence	Questions for spoofing	belligerence	Questions for spoofing	unpleasant humor	Negative and painful jokes
	Unpleasant humor		Unpleasant humor		
Family contempt	Complain about spouse family	Family contempt	Complain about spouse family	Family contempt	Use "We" about himself/herself and his/her family
			Put grace about family		Complain about spouse family
contempt	Taunt	contempt	Mockery	contempt	Blame
			Taunt or Blame		
Domineering	Ultimatum	Domineering / expectation	Expressing individual views and feelings as a bigeminal views	Domineering	Insistence on individual preferences
			Decide for opposite party		
			Ultimatum		
			Constantly talking		
Nervous humor	Nervous humor	Tense humor	tense joking		
Self-insulting	Self-insulting	Self-contempt	Self-Taunt or Self-Blame	Self-contempt	Propounding the problem with own questioning
Sadness	Spite	Sadness	Spite	sadness	Spite
Retreat	Withdraw				
	Avoiding continuing the discussion				

Table 2. Frequency of Components of Negative Interaction Pattern in Three Stages of Family Life Cycle

		Frequency		
		Couples without children	**Childbearing families**	**Families with teenagers**
Defensiveness	Wife's	18	28	38
	Husbands	20	22	35
Criticism	Wife's	29	41	18
	Husbands	20	37	14
Anger	Wife's	18	24	13
	Husbands	22	30	15
Gender rules	Wife's	4	3	0
	Husbands	2	5	0
belligerence	Wife's	0	4	5
	Husbands	0	8	9
Family contempt	Wife's	17	13	2
	Husbands	14	11	0
contempt	Wife's	3	6	3
	Husbands	1	4	5
Domineering	Wife's	8	31	11
	Husbands	12	28	17
Tense humor	Wife's	0	2	1
	Husbands	0	5	3
Self-contempt	Husbands	3	3	4
		4	2	2
Sadness	Wife's	1	1	3
		0	0	0
Retreat	Husbands	0	0	9
		0	0	15

Table 3. Comparison of the Components of Positive Interaction Patterns in Three Stages of Family Life Cycle

Families with Teenagers		**Childbearing Families**		**Couples without Children**	
Interest for relation	Asking open questions	Interest for relation	Asking open questions	Interest for relation	Asking open questions
	Seeking and asking for more additional information.		Seeking and asking for more additional information.		Seeking and asking for more additional information.
Validation	Completing sentences of opposite party	Validation	repeating the opposite party's talk with his-her words	Validation	Tell opposite party's talk with own words (not by repeating spouse's words)
	Positive Mind Reading		Understanding and accepting (Confirming Phrases)		
	Mutual reference (Presenting Joint report)				
	Listening and nodding		Listening and nodding		
	Understanding and accepting (Confirming Phrases)		Complete sentences		
	Accepting couple's point of view with Apology		Accepting couple's point of view with an apology		
Affection	Kindly approaching	Affection	love and Friendly sentences	Affection	Words of love and Friendly
			Approaching kindly		Affinity kindly
	Empathy		Empathy		Empathy
	Admiration				Admiration
Humor	Wit	Humor	Wit	Humor	Exaggerated Humor
	Positive and laughable jokes		Positive and laughable jokes		Wit
			Try to make each other laugh		Positive and laughable jokes for both
Self-disclosure	Telling the emotion honestly	Self-disclosure	Telling the emotions honestly	Self-disclosure	Telling honesty and emotion
	Express their own imperfections				

Table 3. Comparison of the Components of Positive Interaction Patterns in Three Stages of Family Life Cycle (continued)

Families with Teenagers		Childbearing Families		Couples without Children	
See themselves as a unit	The use of the word We	See themselves as a unit	The use of the word We	See themselves as a unit	The use of the word We
		Surprise	Rejoice /joy	Surprise	Surprise
				Cautious behavior	Limiting the scope of the issue (no generalization)
					Limiting the scope of the issue (no generalization)
					Accepting probability of mistake
		Sense of humor	propounding the humorous aspects of Conflict	Sense of humor	Relative posing of the issue
Emotion Management	Agreement on finishing controversy or postponing it	Emotion management	Agreement on finishing controversy or postponing it	Emotion management	Agreement on completing the discussion or postpone it
Normalization	Know the problem normal	Normalization	Know the problem normal	Normalization	Know the problem normal

Table 4. Frequency of the Components of Positive Interaction Pattern in Three Stages of Family Life Cycle

		Frequency		
		Couples without Children	Childbearing Families	Families with Teenagers
Cautious behavior	Wife's	73	8	0
	Husbands	80	0	0
Interest in the relation	Wife's	95	89	83
	Husbands	99	92	81
Validation	Wife's	140	118	120
	Husbands	138	128	130
Affection	Wife's	106	93	71
	Husbands	102	89	74
Humor	Wife's	36	32	31
	Husbands	49	56	54
Surprise	Wife's	2	4	0
	Husbands	7	3	0
Self-disclosure	Wife's	75	71	43
	Husbands	73	68	47
See themselves as a unit	Wife's	71	92	104
	Husbands	65	89	95
Sense of humor	Wife's	4	1	0
	Husbands	7	3	0
Emotion management	Wife's	2	3	5
	Husbands	4	6	11
Normalization	Wife's	7	6	6
	Husbands	11	8	4

In group 3, validation was often seen in the form of "completing sentences" and "listening to the spouse while nodding and maintaining eye contact". Mutual reference and positive mind reading were regarded as the other forms of validation in this group.

The use of the word "We" was more seen in group 3, compared to group 2, and it was observed more in group 2 compared to group 1. Emotion management gradually increased in groups 2 and 3.

Discussion

Totally, 12 components of negative interactive patterns were identified including defensiveness, criticism, anger, gender rules, belligerence, family contempt, contempt, domineering, tense humor, contempt for her/himself, sadness, and retreat-withdraw. In addition, the components of positive interactive pattern were as follows: interest in the relation, validation, affection, humor, surprise, self-disclosure, seeing themselves as a unit, sense of humor, emotion management, and normalization.

Eleven codes out of 12 negative interaction codes, and 7 codes out of 11 positive interaction codes identified in this study were similar to the Iranian Couples Interaction Coding System [29]. It should be noted that one of the inclusion criteria of the present study was the couples' adjustment. It is obvious that couples with different levels of adjustments have different verbal exchanges and interaction patterns [31].

According to the findings, the component of defensiveness was observed in all three stages, its dominant manifestation was, however, different in each stage, which was also true of the other mentioned behavioral components – with the exception of cautious behavior, surprise, sense of humor and retreat. There were significant differences in the amount of usage, form,

purpose and verbal manifestation of these components in each of the stages. It can be stated that couples' interaction patterns undergo a change with age [32]. In line with the above-mentioned findings, Gotmann and Notarius [33] showed that the younger couples and the older ones differ in interaction patterns. Development theorists maintain that couples do not exhibit the same behavior in their lifetime and the behaviors of the wife and husband change with age [33].

The greatest amount of criticism and conflict was seen in group 2. Generally, the frequency of negative interactions in the childbearing families is at the highest level. Birth of a child requires creating a plethora of personal and mutual roles that parents should be quickly adjusted to. These changes can influence interactions, functions, roles and conflict level of parents [16].

The amount of criticism decreased in group 3. Being consistent with this finding, "retreat" was a dominant behavioral component in group 3. It should be noted that people who had married a long time ago tried to avoid the controversial topics in order to prevent negative thoughts, feelings and generally negative space in their lives due to the fact that they are aware of the consequences of conflicts [34]. The relation between the length of marriage and conflict avoidance can also be explained using the concept of acceptance. when people live together for a long time, they realize that there are some unchangeable areas in life; therefore, they accept them and use avoidance as a strategy for these areas [35].

The gender rules in group 1 were mostly observed in the form of prejudices against the female - male roles and characteristics. Due to little common knowledge in this stage, couples prejudge each other on the basis of the inadequate knowledge acquired from the society and other resources. Common knowledge is defined as common information, experiences and emotions of couples as well as couples' knowing each other. When a child is added to a family, gender roles are reorganized and conflicts increase. However, disagreement regarding apportionment of responsibilities and roles decreases over time, and the couples reach an agreement as to how to apportion responsibilities [36].

Belligerence was not observed in group 1. Unpleasant humor in this stage can be attributed to a paucity of knowledge of each other. Over time, as couples' knowledge of each other rises, they can predict the reactions of the opposite party better [37] . In addition, increase in implicit and indirect communication can explain indirect expressions of dissatisfaction, and increased belligerence.

The results showed that family contempt was observed more in groups 1 and 2 in comparison with group 3, which can reflect the gradual formation of the couples' outer boundaries and consolidation of this process over time [18].

"Domineering - expectation" was a dominant behavior component in group 2. After passing several years of marriage and knowing each other relatively, the couples think they know everything about the opposite party and consider all their own perceptions real and correct. Actually, couples in group 2 judge problems unilaterally [17].

Positive interactions (including cautious behavior, interest in the relation, affection, self-disclosure, sense of humor and normalization) were at the highest level in group 1, and were gradually reduced in group 2 and 3. This finding is consistent with that of Guildford and Bengston [38] who rendered the amount of positive interaction in young couples (average age: 22 years old and the average length of marriage, 3 years), is at the highest level. The lowest amount is allocated to middle-aged couples (average age: 44 years old, the average length of marriage, 21 years) and the average amount of positive interaction is seen in the older couples (average age: 67 years old and the average length of marriage: 41 years). Researchers have also found that the feeling expression and self-disclosure in couples who had married a long time ago are less observed compared to young couples [19].

Cautious behavior was the dominant component in group 1 in all three tasks, which can be attributed to doubts about spouse's reaction because couples have inadequate and little common knowledge at this stage. On the other hand, cautious behavior can be ascribed to the communication skills deficits at this stage.

Emotion management was observed in group 3 more than group 2 and 1. The results of studies indicate that people achieve more skills to control and regulate their emotions as they age [39].

Verbal manifestation of validation was different at each stage. Gradually, mutual reference and positive mind reading substitute for confirming phrases and long interpretive sentences, which can be attributed to a rise in couples' common knowledge, coded conversations and forgotten messages (the unstated part of speech) in this stage [12]. In general, explicit verbal communication in group 2 and 3 gradually fell, and implicit and indirect communication rose.

The present research faced some limitations. The demographic variables were not controlled. Consequently, the generalization of results must be made cautiously.

Considering the difference between average age of couples in the two groups (1 and 2) and the third group, some observed differences between couples' interaction patterns may be related to differences in generation features. Another limitation was the cross-sectional nature of the study. Couples may have different characteristics that affect their interaction patterns regardless of their life cycle stage. It is suggested that couples' interaction patterns in the different life cycle stages will be examined in a longitudinal study.

The couples' interaction pattern in other stages of the life cycle should be investigated in future research. It is also suggested that the communication pattern of maladjustment couples be investigated and compared with adjusted couples.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate significant differences in the amount of usage, form, purpose and verbal manifestation of interaction components in each of the life cycle stages. In addition, there is one or more

dominant behavioral component in each stage that can arise from the specific characteristics of that stage. Therefore, it seems that the interaction patterns are influenced by the "family life cycle". The results of this study can help us to better understand why and how marital satisfaction, maladjustments and divorce statistics changes over time. Hence, these results are useful to design the appropriate interventions for improving the quality of couples' relations.

Conflict of Interest

Authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval

Ethical principles were considered in this article. The participants were informed about the purpose of the research and its implementation stages. They were also assured about the confidentiality of their information. Moreover, they were allowed to leave the study whenever they wish, and if desired, the results of the research would be available to them.

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