

The Study of the Lived Experience of Tolerance for Differences in Satisfied Marriages: A Phenomenological Study

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Submitted: 26 March 2022

Accepted: 18 April 2022

Int J Behav Sci. 2022; 16(1): 55-60

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Abstract

Introduction: As people enter a marital relationship, differences inevitably emerge. Tolerance for differences is a phenomenon that many people may experience when they get married. The current study aimed to investigate the lived experience of tolerance for differences in satisfied marriages.

Method: The present study was a descriptive phenomenology psychological research. The sample consisted of 11 married people who had experienced tolerance for differences and were selected in a purposeful and snowball manner in 2019-2020. A semi-structured interview was used to collect data. Data gathering continued until the data saturation stage.

Results: According to the results of this study, the experience of tolerance has six constituents, which are: love and respect for spouse and family, consulting in life, division of duties and roles, understanding of differences, patience and forgiveness and support of couples' families.

Conclusion: The results of the study indicated that differences and disagreements between couples do not necessarily lead to conflict, but rather, these differences are experienced as an acceptance through tolerance.

Keywords: Tolerance, Difference, Satisfaction, Phenomenology

Introduction

Conflict between couples is a common feature of the human condition. When people interact and form relationships, disagreements inevitably emerge. Whether the results of disagreement are constructive or destructive depends on better management of interpersonal disagreements and this, can lead to stronger relationships, alternative ways of seeing difficult problems, and discovery of better solutions for these problems [1]. As O'Neill points out, "Current divorce legislation has made it easier for couples to end their marriages in comparison to previous decades. Thus, couples might find it easier to opt for divorce rather than look at each other's differences and learn acceptance through tolerance"[2].

To tolerate or put up with differences is tolerance. Tolerance may also represent a "let's agree to disagree" stance when it comes to controversial issues. It does not mean that one must accept or embrace words, deeds or ideas that are against his or her beliefs and values [3].

The construct of "tolerance for disagreement" has emerged from conceptualizations and research in organizational and group communication contexts [1]. Individuals will differ in the extent to which they can tolerate disagreement, and thus avoid entering into conflicts [4]. McCroskey argues that people with a high tolerance for disagreement are relatively conflict resistant whereas, people with a low tolerance for disagreement are highly conflict

prone [5]. In Integrated Behavioral Couples Therapy (IBCT), acceptance through tolerance is viewed as a facilitator of marital satisfaction. Christensen, defined acceptance through tolerance as "accepting your partner by tolerating the deeper meaning of that unpleasant behavior, to see the behavior in a larger context and to appreciate its value and importance to a relationship" [2]. Jacobson and Christensen believe that the key to building acceptance through tolerance is that the couple experienced the other partner's difficult behavior without trying to change or escape from that behavior [6].

According to an empirical study based on the Islamic approach, tolerance consisted of spouse's empathy and acceptance, emotional control and patience, facilitation of spouse's growth and flourishing process, and beneficence and forgiveness toward spouse [7]. In religious texts (Quranic verses and Sayings) examples of tolerant behaviors of the spouse are described as follows: "One is patient with spouse's tantrum; in any case, respects his/her spouse and avoids imposing things on her/him; supports his wife emotionally and facilitates her growth and actuation; and is patient in the face of his/her spouse's mistakes [8].

In the O'Neill's study, the purpose was to understand how acceptance through tolerance was experienced by couples who reported marital satisfaction. In her study, 11 sub-themes and three themes were identified as follows: 1) consulting each other when there is a disagreement; 2) understanding there are differences in who they are; 3) the glue that holds them together [3]. Witenberg in his research explores the formation of tolerance as a concept by following the developmental trajectory. In his research, three major underlying beliefs emerged supporting a tolerant stance. These beliefs were fairness and justice, empathy for the plight of others, and the need for reason and logic [9].

Shahid and Shahid in their study showed there was a significant positive correlation between tolerance and marital satisfaction [10]. Another study found that husbands' tolerance and empathy were related to an increase in the wife's marital satisfaction [11].

Khojasteh Mehr et al. in a study found that there are significant positive correlations among the four components of tolerance (spouse's empathy and acceptance, emotional control and patience, facilitation of spouse's growth and actuation process, and beneficence and forgiveness toward spouse) with marital intimacy [8]. Using a Canadian sample, Boon and Khojasteh Mehr found evidence for the tolerance four-factor model [12]. The gap in the literature on tolerance in past research is that most of the studies are quantitative. It seems that tolerance, has only been qualitatively investigated in one study. Cultural and religious considerations must be taken into account when studying tolerance behavior. Qualitative research is more appropriate to study these cultural considerations [13].

Therefore, understanding the meaning of tolerance from a qualitative point of view, and considering tolerance in the context of an Iranian sample is important, and the present study seeks to answer the question; what is the experience of married people that report tolerance of their differences in the context of their marital relationship, and how do they describe tolerance for differences in their satisfied marriage?

Method

This study utilizes the Giorgi and Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological psychological approach [14]. Participants in this study included 11 married people who lived in Lorestan province during the 2019-2020. Table 1 is the demographic characteristics based on information obtained from the research participants.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Participant	Age	Sex	Length of marriage	Education	Job	Number of children
P1	48	Female	24	PhD	Teacher	3
P2	51	Male	24	M.A	Employee	3
P3	48	Male	22	Diploma	Self-employment	2
P4	46	Female	22	M.A	Employee	2
P5	33	Male	10	B.A	Employee	0
P6	46	Male	18	M.A	Contractor Engineer	2
P7	50	Female	26	B.A	Employee	2
P8	42	Female	23	B.A	Employee	1
P9	30	Female	12	Diploma	Hair stylist	2
P10	32	Male	12	Diploma	Self-employment	2
P11	39	Female	24	High school	Housekeeper	2

The main criteria for participating in the study was having an experience of tolerance for differences in marital life (such as differences in ethnic, cultural, economic, social, parenting, financial background) and satisfaction with the marital relationship. "Tolerance in Spouses' Relations Scale" [7], and "Relationship Assessment Scale" [15] were used to confirm that they experience tolerance and satisfaction. Individuals whose scores on these scales were one standard deviation above the mean were selected for this study. Sampling continued in a purposeful and

snowball manner until the theoretical saturation was reached. Over a period of about 40-55 minutes, a Semi-structured interview was used to collect data (sample questions: As a couple, what kind of differences and disagreements did you experience? How do you deal with your differences in ...?) The second researcher recorded the participants' answers and used follow-up questions to keep the focus on the details of the tolerance phenomenon. Each interview was recorded and transcribed using a mobile phone.

The current study used the descriptive phenomenological psychological method, which was articulated by Giorgi and Giorgi (2003), consisting of five significant steps to analyze/synthesize data [16]. In the first stage, the participants' recorded interviews were transcribed and then read a number of times to gain an overall meaning. While reading the data, the researcher is engaged in a process that is called epoche or bracketing, where he/she puts aside previous knowledge about the phenomenon under study. The second step focused on moments of change in meaning, and was marked with the slash (/). In the third stage, the researcher, used a psychological mindset and the process of free imaginative variations, to transfer the natural language of the participants to a form of psychological sensitivity. During this stage, the researcher removes unnecessary elements of the participants' messages. In the fourth stage, the general meaning of the participants' experiences was synthesized and explained [17]. Four criteria (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the data [18]. To increase the credibility, the researcher

considered allocating sufficient time for data collection and good communication with the participants. To evaluate the transferability, the use of sampling technique with maximum diversity was considered. In the confirmability criteria, the interviews were provided to participants to review and make changes if they wished. For dependability criteria, information was provided to two qualitative analysts and in 90% of cases, the results of analyst analysis and coding were similar to the researcher coding.

Results

The results presented in this research used the Giorgi and Giorgi's descriptive phenomenology psychological method.

In general, tolerance in the context of marital life according to the participants in this study consisted of six constituents: 1) love and respect for spouse and family, 2) consulting in life, 3) division of tasks and roles, 4) understanding differences, 5) patience and forgiveness, and 6) support of the couple's families.

Table 2. Excerpt of the Transcribed Data (participant 4), its Transfer to Meaning Units by Slash Mark (/), and Transfer of Meaning Units to Psychological Sensitivity

Extracted from transcribed data	Specified meaning units	Transferring of meaning units to psychological sensitivity
The problems in other families are not comparable to ours. You may not believe that we still value and respect each other as much as we did in the early days of our marriage.	The problems in other families are not comparable to ours. You may not believe that /we still value and respect each other/ as much as we did in the early days of our marriage.	This participant states that she and her husband have been tolerant in life because they respect each other.
He has told me many times that you are a mother and have more contact with children. Regarding education, if I see something that is wrong or if he sees that I am wrong, when we are alone, we talk and say that it is better to tell our child what behavior and action is best to have.	He has told me many times that you are a mother and have more contact with children. /Regarding education, if I see something that is wrong or if he sees that I am wrong, when we are alone, we talk and say that it is better to tell our child what behavior and action is best to have./	This participant states that she and her husband have been tolerant in life because they have had division of tasks and roles.

Table 3. Constituents and Samples of Some of the Participants

Constituents	Experience of some participants
Love and respect for spouse and family	In my opinion, for a life, first of all, love is important. When there is love in life, you can overcome all problems (participant 9).
Consulting in life	By consulting and agreeing with each other, we weigh the aspects together. When it comes to parenting, if I see something wrong or if he sees that I'm wrong, when we are alone, we talk (participant 4).
Division of tasks and roles	Now that I'm dividing tasks a bit, I have calmed down. I had a lot of burden on my shoulders. I used to do everything, lessons, cooking, housekeeping and everything. Now that I've reduced it, I feel much better (participant 1).
Understanding differences	In some cases, you have to accept that these differences exist and cannot be changed. I should not expect him to agree with me in everything. The other partner has a series of differences with you that you have to accept him with all those differences (participant 4).
Patience and forgiveness	Everyone has their own problems, but with patience one can build a good life. By respecting each other, by enduring some hardships that one knows they are going through, with all this, one can achieve a good life (participant 9).
Support of the couple's families	I had problems early in our life, well, except that it was difficult, I also made problems, but I think my wife solved them all, I owe her somehow. It was hard, but thank God we did not ignore my family being very supportive (participant 10).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of tolerance for differences in satisfied couples. The results showed that different constituents have a role in tolerance for differences that each of them can be separately considered by researchers and therapists.

The first constituent "love and respect for spouse and family" was experienced by all 11 participants in this study and was considered as an essential part of the lived experience of tolerance in participants' marital relationship. The participants began their relationships with the experience of love and affection; maintained their love with the skill of respecting each other; and with respectful positive encounters, tolerated differences and disagreements in the relationship. This constituent was also supported by the study [2]. Respectful communication is an extremely useful skill in dealing with differences in a committed relationship. With a respectful relationship, a healthy reciprocal relationship can be maintained for many years [19]. One aspect of respect is how one deals with differences [20]. Love can help people overcome challenges and provide purpose and a resource to cope and engage in times of conflict and stress [21]. Love requires patience, tolerance, being able to compromise [22]. Tolerance, trust, respect and effective communication are elements that can maintain love in a marital relationship [23].

The second constituent "consulting in life" was experienced by 10 participants (except participant 2) and was considered as an essential part of the lived experience of tolerance in participants' marital relationship. The participants considered consultation with each other when deciding on various issues of marital relationship as a representation of respect for their spouse and used it to resolve differences and disagreements. This method has led to tolerance for each other's differences and increased their satisfaction with their marital relationship. This constituent was supported by a previous study [2]. One of the factors that causes understanding and cooperation of family members is the existence of consultation in the family, which as a result, creates a strong and intimate family. It is also the best protector against life's problems and differences [24].

The third constituent "division of tasks and roles" was experienced by 10 participants in this study (except participant 5) and is considered as an essential part of the lived experience of tolerance in participants' marital relationship. Participants believed that the division of tasks and roles, in addition to representation of the couples' understanding, respect and intimacy, decreased the stress of role overlapping and life problems. In addition, the division of tasks helped resolve differences and disagreements in the marriage; hence, leading to tolerance with each other, and ultimately increased marital satisfaction. This constituent was not observed in previous studies. Changing gender roles in today's society, has led to a greater emphasis on a woman's independence, and may increase the likelihood of conflict in romantic relationships. The continuity, growth and

excellence of family members requires empathy and cooperation of all family members, especially couples. Religious teachings have divided the duties of family members in such a manner that everyone is responsible for dividing duties so that the family can perform its functions more effectively. The cooperation of the couple in managing the affairs of life and doing things at home and avoiding negligence in the affairs of life makes relationships more intimate [24].

The fourth constituent "understanding differences" was experienced by nine participants in this study (except participants 10 and 11) and is considered as an essential part of the lived experience of tolerance in participants' marital relationship. Since every human being is unique and different, it is normal for couples to have differences and disagreements. The participants believed that understanding and accepting differences, when they are difficult to change, is the only way to resolve differences and disagreements about life issues, and understanding the differences leads to couples being tolerant to each others' differences. This constituent was also supported by previous studies [8, 3]. Marital relationship is composed of two people with different abilities and talents, with different needs and interests, and, in a word, with different personalities. An intimate marital relationship requires couples to learn to communicate and be different from each other [25]. Because each person is very different, disagreement in a relationship is inevitable [19]. Situations in which spouses' interests and needs are different are unavoidable. Yet, the ability to manage differences constructively assists couples to establish intimate relationships. In Islamic culture, tolerance is defined as the best way of dealing with differences in human relationships [8]. How a person deals with differences is very important [20]. The quicker the couples learn to become tolerant of differences, the smoother marital life becomes [3].

The fifth constituent "patience and forgiveness" was considered by eight participants in this study (except participants 3, 4 and 10) as an essential part of the lived experience of tolerance in participants' marital relationship. Participants believed that because each person is unique and different from the other, it is normal for a couple to be in a situation where their interests and needs are different. As a result, patience and forgiveness towards the spouse leads to tolerance for disagreements, reduces harm and resentment, and ultimately leads to increased marital satisfaction. This constituent was also supported by a previous study [8]. Because each individual is very different, disagreement in a relationship is inevitable [19]. Actually, it can be stated that situations in which spouses' interests and needs are different are unavoidable. Yet, the ability to manage differences constructively assists couples to establish intimate relationships [8]. According to social exchange theory, people enter into relationships with different opinions about their role. Couples may not discuss differences at the beginning of their relationship, but as the relationship deepens and lasts, these differences become more controversial [26]. The ability to forgive a spouse's mistake

plays an important role in relationship satisfaction. [27]. Forgiveness of spouse's mistakes can reduce couples' anger and as a result can be a way to reconcile [28]. Forgiving is beneficial in healing marital relationships and can positively affect the health and well-being of spouses [29]. "The capacity to seek and grant forgiveness is seen as one of the most significant factors contributing to marital longevity and marital satisfaction" [30]. Forgiveness can also improve couples' communication performance [31] and lead to healing couples' psychological problems [32].

The sixth constituent "support of couples' families" was considered by seven participants in this study (except participants 1,5,7 and 8) as an essential part of the lived experience of tolerance in participants' marital relationship. Participants believed that receiving appropriate support and understanding from their family, prevented the escalation of disagreement and squabble between couples, caused them to cope with differences, and thus their adjustment and tolerance with each other, and ultimately, increased marital satisfaction. This constituent was not reflected in any of the studies. The support and engagement of couples' family are important. Adequate social support and understanding from family and friends, helps couples feel better about themselves and communicate better to others. Family support not only reduces social problems, but also indirectly reduces stress in communication problems [33]. The effect of perceived social support of spouses on increasing the satisfaction and quality of marital relationship has been identified in four areas: 1) support decreases couples' feeling of loneliness in the confrontation of stress. 2) It decreases depression and its effects. 3) It prevents couples from disagreement and arguing. 4) Increases couples' emotional intimacy [34]. In family-oriented and collectivist cultures such as the Iranian society, families are not indifferent to the problems of their members and social support in the family is of great importance [35].

Conclusion

The practical and important message of the participants in the present study to all couples is that by using strategies such as love and respect for spouse and family, consulting in life, division of tasks and roles, understanding differences, patience and forgiveness, and support of the couple's families, can tolerate their differences, prevent the devastating flood of divorce and help to keep the marriage satisfied. They also showed the couple therapists that tolerance-based training and therapies (based on accepting differences through tolerance) could potentially be important competitors and alternatives to conflict-based therapies and interventions. Like any other research, this study faced limitations as well. One of the limitations of the study was the selection of research participants from a specific geographical environment, although the purpose of qualitative research is not generalization of findings. Investigating the lived experience of people who did not tolerate their differences can also provide knowledge and information

about the meaning and structure of tolerance and determine whether tolerance and intolerance are two separate structures or are along a continuum. Replication of this research in different cultural contexts of our country and cultural contexts outside Iran will be important to understand how couples describe the tolerance.

It is necessary for researchers in psychology and family counseling to study the underlying factors of tolerance structure, which were obtained in this study, in a quantitative way.

Conflict of interest

All authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval

The ethical issues followed in this research were: 1) obtaining informed consent from the participants to participate in the research; 2) ensuring that information remains confidential; 3) the use of pseudonyms for them; 4) their right to withdraw from the research at any stage of the research; and 5) informing participants of the recording of the interview content.

Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank all the participants who participated in this research. Also, this research (with the research number SCU.EM98.467) has been financially supported by the Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz.

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