

Qualitative Study of Couple Identity Gaps in Disturbed Married Women

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Abstract

Introduction: Marital life is always affected by various factors, and one example can be marital conflict. The goal of the present study was to investigate the couple's identity gaps in disturbed married women's relationships and discover the factors that cause these identified gaps.

Method: This research is a qualitative content analysis with a conventional approach. The study included all the disturbed married women of Shiraz city in 2022. The purposeful sampling method was used to collect the sample in this research. The data for the research was collected through semi-structural interviews. Theoretical saturation was achieved with 16 interviewees and the data were collected and analyzed.

Results: The interviews underwent analysis and coding, resulting in the identification of 173 concepts, 32 subcategories, and eight main categories. These eight main categories encompass Communication breakdown, lack of empathic understanding, individualism, lack of acceptance, lack of mutual investment in the relationship, feeling insecure, comprehensive dissatisfaction, and marriage without commitment.

Conclusion: It appears that the gaps in a couple's identity can be attributed to a combination of individual factors and communication issues, which ultimately lead to confusion in their communication patterns. Consequently, it is recommended that counselors and couple therapists utilize the findings of this study when conducting premarital counseling and couple therapy at counseling centers.

Keywords: Marriage, Marital Identity Gaps, Marital Conflict, Married Women

Introduction

Marital distress occurs when at least one partner feels dissatisfied [1]. In married life, couples face many problems that sometimes create challenges for them. Couples achieve a couple's identity if they can overcome these problems [2]. The question "Who are we?" can be a challenge for some couples at the beginning of their married life. Couples look at challenges and problems in a relationship-oriented way when they see themselves as part of the relationship and form a coherent couple identity, and sometimes they are even willing to give up their needs in favor of a marital relationship [3]. These couples support each other in dealing with difficult situations and consider the other's needs as a priority [4], but it seems that this is not always the case. Couples may experience gaps in their marital identity because of sharing new experiences with their partner, adding new characteristics of the partner to their self-concept, and identifying new roles in the marital relationship [5]. According to certain researchers [6], the concept of "couple's identity gaps" refers to the perceived differences or discrepancies between the shared identity of a couple. These gaps arise from the varying perspectives each partner holds regarding the couple's identity, leading to inconsistencies between these viewpoints. In other words, it can be said that the couple's identity gap is created when the couple's sense of identity conflicts with each other [7]. Recognizing that

partners share similar perceptions of marital identity is crucial for predicting the overall quality of a marital relationship. When couples experience identity gaps, it can lead to heightened stress and negative perceptions within the relationship. Consequently, couples may feel a sense of disconnection and perceive themselves as lacking a unified partnership [8].

Essentially, individuals who encounter gaps in their marital identity after getting married tend to feel dissatisfied with their current relationship. These gaps in identity persistently emerge, leading to a reduced willingness to maintain the marital bond. Consequently, married couples may experience negative consequences in their communication and overall relationship dynamics due to these gaps in their shared identity [9]. Understanding and acknowledging the various discrepancies or gaps in couples' identities play a crucial role in their capacity to effectively handle stress and conflict within their relationships [7].

As the gaps between couples continue to grow and persist in a negative manner, it can result in couples becoming emotionally distant from each other and losing their sense of connection to married life and their shared identity. Marital conflicts arising from these circumstances are among the factors that contribute to the gradual breakdown of the marital relationship and an increased likelihood of divorce [10]. This feeling of dissatisfaction with the marital relationship, which can spread between partners, can be defined as a sense of discontentment experienced by at least one of the individuals [11]. In general, the presence of identity gaps in couples can lead to an increase in marital dissatisfaction, which, in turn, contributes to a rise in negative interactions and conflicts within the relationship. This escalation of negative interactions gives rise to a sense of marital disaffection, and the accumulated frustration acts as a barrier to future positive interactions between the partners [12]. In more severe cases, this marital frustration can lead to the breakdown of the marriage itself [13]. Merrill (2014) conducted a study on identity gaps in couples and their impact on stress and conflict management in romantic relationships. The findings revealed that couples with a higher level of understanding of their shared identity experienced less stress and negativity during conflicts compared to couples with a lower understanding of their shared identity. Additionally, they reported lower levels of anxiety [7].

In this particular research, the sample group consisted solely of women, and there were two reasons for this approach: 1. Each individual develops a unique understanding of their marital identity based on their own perception of participation in the marital relationship and their understanding of their partner [14]. Therefore, a couple's identity does not necessarily stem from a universally accepted definition shared by both partners. Thus, it was not essential for both husbands and wives to participate in the study. 2. Women were more accessible and cooperative in this research context. Hence, they were chosen as the sample group.

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the

existence of identity gaps in married lives and explore their consequences, particularly considering the lack of previous studies on couple's identity gaps in Iran. The study aimed to shed light on the elements or factors contributing to these identity gaps, recognizing their significant role in marital dissatisfaction and the amplification of confusion within marital relationships. To address this objective, the posed research question was: "What are the elements that contribute to couple identity gaps?"

Method

The current study utilized a qualitative content analysis with a conventional approach. The aim was to explore the identity gaps within couples, as there was a lack of qualitative research and theoretical framework regarding this aspect. The target population consisted of women experiencing marital disaffection in Shiraz City, while the sample included married women who sought counseling services in the city during 2022. In order to participate in the study, the women had to meet certain criteria, including being married for at least five years, having at least one child, experiencing a troubled life, and having a low level of understanding of their marital life according to the center's consultant. Additionally, the participants were diagnosed with marital conflict through interviews conducted by the researcher. Exclusion criteria encompassed respondents who were unwilling to continue the interview due to reasons such as the recollection of negative experiences, avoidance of discussing personal problems in their marital life or withdrawing from the interview process altogether.

The researcher initially gathered data by posing open-ended questions during the interviews. The questions included the following: 1. What are the areas in which you and your spouse disagree when it comes to managing your married life? 2. What factors or circumstances have hindered your ability to have a successful marriage? 3. What specific factors have contributed to having different perspectives on married life and related issues? 4. How do you communicate with each other when faced with various challenges in life? 5. If you both have shared life goals, how do you collaborate and work towards achieving them? 6. How do you handle disagreements and life challenges? 7. How do you cope with each other's distinct characteristics and personality traits? 8. How do you respond to positive qualities or kind gestures shown by your spouse? 9. How do you address and accommodate each other's desires and needs in your shared life? 10. How do you support each other during difficult moments in life, such as illness? (If the interviewee had trouble understanding, an example was provided.) These interview questions aimed to explore various aspects of the participants' marital experiences and dynamics.

Following each interview, detailed notes were taken, and the process of data analysis and coding commenced simultaneously. The interviews continued until data saturation was reached, indicating that no new substantial information was emerging. At that point, the final data

analysis was carried out. Ultimately, a total of 16 interviews were conducted, yielding the dataset for the study.

In this method, data analysis is often initiated during the early stages of data collection. This early engagement in analysis allows the researcher to identify relevant sources that address the research questions more effectively in subsequent data collection stages [15]. In the present study, data analysis commenced with the analysis of the first interview. A total of 13 face-to-face interviews and 3 telephone interviews were conducted. The interview process began with the researcher providing an initial explanation of the research purpose. The participants were informed about the interview process, including the presentation of questions, strict adherence to confidentiality principles, and the necessity of recording the conversations. Interviews were conducted only with the participants' full agreement and satisfaction. Following each interview, the text and its content were transcribed, and the coding and categorization process took place. Data analysis was then performed. The coding and categorization of items were carried out independently of the existing theoretical literature, simultaneously with the exploration of the interview text. A step-by-step process was employed to identify the unit of meaning and compress it into a code based on the subject matter. Subitems were determined by merging related codes, leading to the identification of main items from the subitems.

Respecting the principle of participant autonomy, research participation was not dependent on other individuals or cases. The participants were free to decide whether or not to take part in the research. The overall research objectives were clearly presented to the participants during the interviews, ensuring compliance with the principle of informed consent and allowing them to make informed decisions about their participation. It was emphasized that the interviews and reports would remain confidential, demonstrating a commitment to maintaining participant confidentiality. To protect privacy, the terms "participant" or "audience" were used instead of using participants' names during data analysis and reporting. Participants were also given the right to withdraw from the interview process at any time. The researcher made efforts to accurately represent the participants' statements and refrained from manipulating their words. The authors would like to express their gratitude to Dr. Qureshi's counseling center in Shiraz City for their cooperation in the development of this research. The study was registered with the ethics code IR.YAZD.REC.1401.034 on 12.12.2021 in the ethics committee of Yazd University.

Results

Demographic information includes age, average marriage length, level of education, number of children, and occupation (Table 1).

Table 1. Demographic Information

Number	Age	Average marriage length	Level of education	Number of children	Occupation
1	30	10	Bachelor's degree	Two children	Housewife
2	39	22	4 th grade	Two children	Housewife
3	49	29	Diploma	Three children	Housewife
4	40	16	Bachelor's degree	Two children	Housewife
5	24	7	University student	One child	Housewife
6	43	17	Bachelor's degree	1 child	employee
7	47	28	Diploma	2 children	Housewife
8	35	15	Bachelor's degree	1 child	Housewife
9	50	25	Bachelor's degree	1 child	employee
10	39	25	Bachelor's degree	2 children	employee
11	28	8	Diploma	1 child	Housewife
12	33	6	Bachelor's degree	2 children	employee
13	45	16	Master's degree	2 children	Teacher
14	49	8	Bachelor's degree	2 children	Housewife
15	30	5	Master's degree	1 child	Teacher
16	48	25	Master's degree	2 children	Teacher

According to Table 1, the age range of the participants in this research was from 24 to 50 years and their average age was 39.31. Also, the duration of marriage was between 5 and 29 years and the average duration of marriage was 16.37. The research participants' education level was as follows: 1 primary education, 3 diplomas, 1 University student, 8 bachelor's degrees, and 3 master's degrees. Six of the participants had one child, nine had two children, and one had three children. Among the

participants, nine people were housewives, three people were teachers, and four people were employees.

In this section, research data analysis and interview findings have been discussed. Each of the main items and subitems have been stated, and finally, the result and coding of the interviews have been presented.

Table 2 indicates the main items and subitems, which will be examined in detail.

Table 2. Main Items and Subitems

Main items	Subitems
Communication breakdown	Dislike spouse, tolerating each other's habits, emotional detachment, unstable relationship, emotional vacuum
Lack of empathic understanding	Ignoring each other, misapprehension, Ineffective dialogue, lack of appreciation
Individualism	Lack of understanding, extreme individualism, competitive behaviors
Lack of acceptance	Lack of acceptance of each other, objecting, not accepting opinions
Lack of mutual interest in the marital relationship	Minimum common in life goals, opinion and viewpoint gap, lack of alignment and companionship, minimum support, not to us
Feeling insecure	Lack of peace, psychological insecurity, financial insecurity, Lack of trust, annoying habits
Comprehensive dissatisfaction	Negative feelings about oneself, dissatisfaction with the spouse, negative qualities of the spouse, dissatisfaction with differences
Marital relationship without commitment	Low priority to the primary family, Interfering with others in the marital life, minimum change in socializing during a single life

Communication Breakdown: Communication breakdown refers to a state of brokenness, separation, and distance within a marital relationship, leading to a lack of continuity and negative consequences. It occurs when couples live together but experience instability in their connection. For instance, participant No. 6 expressed their experience of emotional breakdown by stating, "We lack emotional attentiveness towards each other. There is a significant emotional distance between us. I have gradually distanced myself from my partner. It feels like my partner wouldn't care if I ceased to exist. I don't hold any importance for them." Similarly, Participant No. 2 shared their dissatisfaction by saying, "Living with him doesn't make me feel good." Interviewee No. 5 expressed concerns about potential infidelity, stating, "Even after marriage, I feel insecure that my husband might bring someone else into our home when I'm not there." Interviewee No. 11 described their partner's lack of emotional expression, saying, "I express my feelings openly, but my husband rarely does. He only expresses about 2% of his emotions out of 100%. He doesn't share his thoughts or emotions verbally or emotionally and appears emotionally detached." These statements illustrate various aspects of communication breakdown within marital relationships, such as emotional distance, dissatisfaction, insecurity, and a lack of emotional expression.

Lack of Empathic Understanding: In a disturbed marital relationship, a lack of empathic understanding becomes evident. Empathy refers to the ability to perceive and share the mental experiences and emotions of another person. However, in such relationships, the process of recognizing and deeply understanding each other's thoughts and feelings, showing empathy, appreciation, and attentiveness to each other's unique perspectives is disrupted. Individuals in troubled relationships experience identity gaps, which deprive them of these essential elements. Participant No. 7 expressed their experience of being ignored, stating, "To be honest, I never had an issue with communication, but my spouse completely disregarded my words." Interviewee No. 8 shared their struggles, saying, "I couldn't have a conversation with him without it turning into a challenge. We constantly misunderstand each other. We were never able to communicate gently, and even the smallest words lead to

discord." Interviewee No. 8 further stated, "No matter what I say, he never seems to understand what I'm trying to convey. Because of this, I can't tolerate him anymore. He never understood my preferences or what I was saying." Interviewee No. 5 described a situation of mutual neglect, mentioning, "Now, we mostly ignore each other. We even ignore changes in appearance and clothing. We disregard each other's words and desires."

Individualism: A tendency toward individualism, such as prioritizing well-being and expressing individual opinions and characteristics, reduces the willingness to have a marital relationship. According to these explanations, if individualism grows excessively in married life and each of the couples has little capacity for growth and prosperity, this relationship will move from equality to inequality. When individualism and attention to individual benefits increase, couples often get bored and tired of each other and feel dissatisfied with having this relationship. In a sample, Interviewee No. 6 stated: I realized after my marriage that we were not made for each other at all. This situation worsened continuously. My husband changed a lot after a while. Interviewee No. 2 said about extreme individualism: Individual goals were very important, and my spouse tried to achieve them at any cost. Interviewee number 12 says: In this life, he has been against me rather than being with me for several years. It's like we're competitors rather than partners. Interviewee No. 8 says: My husband always sees my weaknesses as stubborn and deliberate because he brought them up. This misunderstanding has put us against each other so we always argue and have problems.

Lack of Acceptance: Acceptance is a state of mind based on which one should believe the flaws and faults of a life partner and accept them as a fact. Many marital conflicts are the result of unrealistic assessments of weaknesses and individual differences, and unacceptance. In the present research, the main item of non-acceptance is obtained from the subitems of non-acceptance of each other, objecting, and rejecting views. Audience No. 14 commented on the conditional acceptance of each other: I must fight for everything. Interviewee No. 14 expressed a tendency to criticize their partner's physical appearance, mentioning comments such as "You are short." She also mentioned objecting to their partner's salary, comparing it unfavorably to the salaries of other individuals, stating,

"The husbands of my colleagues are bank employees, and they can afford to buy a lot of clothes." Interviewee No. 15 reported that their partner has difficulty accepting opposing opinions, only considering ideas that they deem to be correct, whether those ideas originate from themselves or their family. Interviewee No. 12 shared their frustration, stating, "When I try to communicate and express my desires for a better life, he reacts as if he doesn't hear me or understand that I want what's best for both of us."

Mutual interest in the marital relationship: Mutual interest in a marital relationship refers to the investment of time and energy that couples dedicate to each other. This investment helps establish interdependent structures that aid in managing and maintaining the marital bond. Participant No. 12 expressed a lack of shared interests and preferences, stating, "I want to listen to traditional music, but he prefers pop. When I want to attend a concert, he prefers going on a nature trip. I have a desire to emigrate, but he disagrees. It feels like I'm living with a stranger." Interviewee No. 11 described a situation where their partner was not present when needed, saying, "There were times when I needed support, but he wasn't by my side. I expected him to have my back, but he wasn't there for me." Interviewee No. 6 expressed a desire to pursue higher education but felt a lack of support from their spouse, stating, "I wanted to go to university, but I didn't receive significant support from my husband." This lack of support can create feelings of disappointment and hinder personal growth within the relationship. These accounts reflect a lack of mutual interest and investment in the marital relationship, where couples struggle to find common ground, provide support during difficult times, or support each other's individual aspirations. This lack of shared investment can lead to feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction within the relationship.

Feeling insecure: Feeling insecure within a marital relationship refers to a lack of confidence, respect, peace, and living without fear. When insecurities become a part of the relationship, it can lead to incompatibility, anxiety, and identity gaps, and negatively impact the mental health of both individuals involved. If left unaddressed, these challenges can further exacerbate the issues within the relationship. Participant No. 14 expressed sadness over their partner's reluctance to disclose their income information, mentioning feelings of sadness and suspicion due to their partner's secretive behavior. Participant No. 3 described a serious conflict with their spouse, not only involving themselves but also their children. They expressed a sense of fulfilling their responsibilities correctly, while their spouse tends to be self-righteous and confrontational. Interviewee No. 13 mentioned their partner hiding their income due to shame, and they expressed their objection to their partner's salary. Interviewee No. 10 shared a general sense of insecurity and lack of relaxation around their partner. They expressed a desire for a proper and peaceful life, which they feel is not shared by their spouse.

Comprehensive dissatisfaction: Comprehensive dissatisfaction within a married life refers to a significant

discontentment that affects the stability and foundation of the marital relationship. It encompasses feelings of unhappiness, dissatisfaction with one's spouse, and a lack of enjoyment in various aspects of married life. Participant No. 6 mentioned a significant change in their spouse's behavior since becoming financially independent, leading to a dislike for their spouse. They expressed tolerating their spouse but also feeling harassed by their behavior, which resulted in distancing themselves emotionally. Participant No. 16 highlighted cultural differences as a major challenge in their relationship. The fact that they and their spouse come from different backgrounds and environments poses a significant problem. Interviewee No. 15 described their spouse as a perfectionist, contrasting their own nature. The spouse's perfectionism manifests in their expectations of others, while they are not as strict with themselves. Interviewee No. 8 mentioned specific events during the marriage that have led to their current anger toward their spouse. These events have had a significant impact on their relationship and have contributed to their desire for divorce.

marital relationship without commitment: A marital relationship without commitment refers to a lack of dedication, responsibility, and sacrifice within the partnership. Commitment involves caring for each other, remaining faithful, and standing together through both joyful and challenging times. When commitment and adherence are absent, the marital relationship becomes weak and its foundations unstable. Interviewee No. 5 attributed a portion of their current situation to the interference and inappropriate behavior of their spouse's family. This interference undermines the commitment and respect within the relationship, leading to conflicts and disputes. Interviewee No. 16 expressed an imbalance in financial responsibilities, stating that most of the burden falls on them while their spouse lacks any sense of responsibility. Interviewee No. 4 described constant worry about the well-being of their children and the future.

Discussion

According to the purpose of the present research, this question was raised, what are the components of the identity gap in disturbed couples?

In total, we found some factors that cause couple identity gaps in the relationships of disturbed people according to the coding and data analysis of this study. These factors include communication breakdown, lack of empathic understanding, individualism, lack of acceptance, lack of mutual investment in the relationship, feeling insecure, comprehensive dissatisfaction, and marriage without commitment. It seems that none of these items are separate from each other and do not create these gaps alone. It tenses interpersonal reactions and increases negative consequences. In general, couples may not be able to function efficiently due to the addition of new characteristics and roles, especially when they enter their married life. As a result, they face problems that ultimately lead to gaps in the couple's identity and ruin the dynamics between couples in their lives together. Spousal identity gaps have consequences for the marital life cycle and

process. Disputes and disagreement are inevitable phenomena in married lives, but their destructive effects among disturbed couples greatly reduce the flexibility between spouses in their married life.

The outcomes of this study align with Mead's (2002) findings regarding hostility and distrust within troubled couples' relationships [16], as well as with the research conducted by Silares et al. (2000) on the challenges of effective communication [17]. Furthermore, with the discoveries of Emri et al. (2021) disturbed couples encounter issues such as mistrust, interpersonal conflict, and negative emotions in their marital lives [18]. Mead (2002), in his research on disturbed couples, found that more negativity, hostility, and mistrust are experienced in the interactions of these spouses [16]. Research shows that the sense of marital identity, patience, forgiveness, and companionship in the ups and downs of life between spouses improves the ability to perceive the opinions of each other and will eventually be more receptive to each other [4]. Seider et al. (2009) showed that a higher level of couple identity is correlated with positive emotional behavior and less negative emotional behavior [19]. Disturbed couples were also significantly weaker in creating meaning and having shared ideas and opinions in their lives. This is one of the important components of a couple's identity. One of the primary mechanisms for identifying and forming a couple's identity is to search and find meaning and common points in married life [20]. Lack of empathic understanding is one of the factors that has a significant impact on couples' identity gaps. Poor dialogue is one of the factors affecting lack of empathy. Research found that couples with a lower understanding of marital identity have a blame dialogue attitude and less verbal communication [17]. They are not relationship-oriented and have a lower desire to understand their spouse. Spouses' love for each other is one of the factors mentioned by most of the interviewees. Noller and Feeney mentioned the depth and intensity of love and affection and its expression as a guarantee of a successful marriage. Perceived gaps in the couple's identities may predict negative symptoms, anxiety, and couple stress, especially in the case of relationship conflict if a relationship fosters dissatisfaction [21]. These findings align with Merrill and Afifi's research [6], indicating that the presence of gaps in couples' identities is associated with higher levels of anxiety, stress, and negative perspectives. Presently, couples face the challenge of lacking a committed bond that ensures the unity of the family system and strengthens its foundation. Couples who experience difficulties often exhibit a lack of commitment due to gaps in their marital identities, which is consistent with the findings of Emery et al. [18]. In their study, individuals with weaker marital identities displayed a lower commitment to their own lives. Consequently, these couples fail to experience the fulfillment and unity that typically accompanies married lives. Naderi Nobandangani demonstrated that the supportive coping strategies employed by couples during crises can significantly impact their marriage and overall marital satisfaction. This support, which troubled couples seem to lack, can lead to

long-term problems because marriage inherently involves unconscious conflicts and reactions between maintaining individuality and being part of a union. Meanwhile, if each member of the couple attempts to unilaterally steer the marital relationship in their preferred direction, disregarding the aspect of togetherness, they will inevitably encounter personal challenges within the partnership [22]. Harmony and adaptation in married life are possible only when spouses achieve a sense of belonging [4].

Finally, it should be mentioned that this research faced some limitations. Interviews were used to obtain data. Sometimes, due to not having enough time, some people did not pay enough attention to answering the interview questions. This is due to the fact that one of the disadvantages of using interviews as an expression of research in qualitative research is being time-consuming. As a result, the researcher was inevitably forced to cancel such interviews. This research was limited to the investigation and description of the experience of disturbed married women in the cultural and social texture of Shiraz metropolitan, and the couple's identity gaps were addressed from the women's perspective. This restricts the ability to generalize the results to men. It also limits the generalizability of the results due to the method used and the small sample size.

Despite collecting data from disturbed married women in the present study, it is suggested that future studies use men in their research and ask men's opinions about the turbulence experienced in their married life. Considering that the interviews were conducted individually and not as a pair of individuals, it is suggested that future studies focus on conducting interviews with disturbed couples to examine and explain the gaps in the couple's identity from the perspective of both couples. It is recommended that the sample size of couples' identity gaps should be investigated in another study with a higher sample size due to its limited nature. The present research was conducted using interviews with the citizens of Shiraz. To increase the generalizability of the results, it is recommended that researchers conduct their studies in other cultural environments and with people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. It is recommended that counselors and psychologists use the results of this research in premarital counseling in order to familiarize couples with the importance of the concept of marital identity gaps and their impact on marriage life. Psychologists and counselors can also use the results of this research in interventions based on couple therapy and family therapy to help disturbed couples. It is recommended to pay attention to the role of interpersonal, social, cultural, and environmental factors in the creation of couples' identity gaps in future research because these factors can affect couples' identity gaps. Finally, to design and validate a native questionnaire should be designed and validated so that it can be used to measure the structure of couples' identity gaps.

Conclusion

Due to the concepts, subcategories, and main categories

obtained in this research, it can be stated that there are several factors that form couple identity gaps in disturbed married women, some of which are caused by a destructive marital relationship and some of which are related to the person herself or her spouse. Also, variables outside the relationship, such as a destructive relationship with families, can play a role in this issue. In general, couple identity gaps can create or expand marital distress. They are problematic as they can cause stress and tension in married lives and as a result, people experience a lower level of relationship satisfaction. Following the creation of these gaps, people feel less understood, and this reduces the effectiveness of communication.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval

The ethical principles in writing this article have been observed according to the instructions of the National Ethics Committee and the COPE regulations.

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