

# Religious Orientation and Marital Satisfaction

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## Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between religious orientation and marital satisfaction among married women who live in Najafabad and Fuladshahr, Isfahan, Iran. 757 women (381 respondents in Najafabad and 376 in Fuladshahr) married for at least 3 years answered both itemized questions about their religious orientations and their marital satisfaction. Results revealed that participants with higher levels of religious orientation reported higher levels of marital satisfaction. The present study sheds light on several aspects of family life cycle theory. These results suggest that religious orientation is linked, in theoretically predictable ways, to marital satisfaction.

**Keywords:** Religious Orientation, Marital Satisfaction, Married Women

## INTRODUCTION

Marriage is one of the most important decisions in personal life and the main factor in determining the quality of life and mental health is marital satisfaction (Hefazi et al., 2005; Greef, 2000). Marriage is a sophisticated experience in life which consists of various goals (Sarukhani, 1997). Marital satisfaction has been defined as a friendly relationship with agreement and understanding of each other (Majidi, 2006). Many factors affect marriage satisfaction. One of these factors is religious orientation which can influence the relationship, commitment and child-rearing.

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Comparative investigation of the relationship between religious orientation and marital satisfaction in two cities is the main goal of this study.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **Marital satisfaction and religious orientation**

Both psychologists and sociologists believe that as religious compatibility grows, the marital stability level raises too. Being religious causes mating of likes and dislikes which leads to marriage (Becker, 1974). As Chiswick and Lehrer (1991) elaborate, religious attitudes influence many activities that the husband and wife perform jointly. Such activities include not only those related directly to religious observance, but also upbringing of children, allocation of time and money, cultivation of friendships, development of business and professional networks, choice of place of residence, and numerous other aspects of everyday life. Greater efficiency and less conflict are expected to characterize those households in which the spouses share the same religious affiliation. Similar ideas are developed in the sociological literature. For example, Bumpass and Sweet's (1972) analysis emphasizes the importance of marital harmony in terms of the similarity between the spouses in their religious beliefs and related values, priorities, and expectations. Religious orientation includes an attitude toward religion or religious practices (Ketabi et al., 2004).

According to the recent reports, the role of religion is very important in couples' lives (Call & Heaton, 1997; Hefazi et al., 2005; Khodayarifard et al., 2006; Wilcox & Wolfinger, 2008). Because of similar reinforces of values between families and similar religious orientations, their relationship must be very strong. Therefore, studies have shown that religious orientation improves marital relationships (Call and Heaton, 1997; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009). Religious orientation could be influential in couples' relationships because religion consists of some guidelines for couples. Families are following the religious institutions to find a way for the concepts like young adulthood, marriage, childbirth, and death. This dependency has been strongest for married couples with children, largely because churches offer religious and normative support to marriage, childbearing and child-rearing (Edgell, 2005; Mahoney, 2003; Wilcox, 2006). Also, both married and unmarried couples with

children benefit from the religious attendance of men, specifically, when the father attends church several times a month the couple are happier in their relationships and are more likely to report that their partner is emotionally supportive (Wolfinger & Wilcox, 2008). In addition, irrespective of marital status, new fathers who attend church frequently are more likely to be involved with their children (Petts, 2007). Greater paternal involvement in religious activities may in turn help the union quality.

According to the recent researches, there is a positive association between religious orientation and relationship quality among married couples (Myers, 2006; Wilcox & Nock, 2006). The growth of religious beliefs among the families shows that as much as it gets higher, marital happiness would be arisen too according to Sullivan's research (2001). In addition, religious commitment is a very important factor in couples' level of marital satisfaction. Call and Heaton's (1997) findings showed that the couples' marital satisfaction was affected by going to the church. Margaret et al. (1990) found that religious congruence with the spouse, worship and attendance in church are the most important predicting factors of marital satisfaction. Orathinkal and Vansteewegen (2006) reported that there is a positive correlation between marriage happiness and religious attitudes.

### **Literature Framework**

In sociology, there is no theory which directly explains the role of religion in marriage. Sociologists like Durkheim, Weber and Marx, generally, discuss religion while other sociologists like Bott, Beck-Gernsheim, Duvall and Hill and Nye have theories about family relationships.

Durkheim argued that religion not only concerns with beliefs, but also encompasses regular rituals and ceremonies on the part of a group of believers, who then develop and strengthen a sense of group solidarity. Rituals are necessary to bind the members of a religious group together and they allow individuals to escape the mundane aspects of daily life into higher realms of experience. Sacred rituals and ceremonies are especially important for occasions such as births, marriages, times of crisis and deaths. Durkheim's theory of religion exemplifies how functionalists examine sociological phenomena. According to Durkheim, people see religion as contributing to the health and continuation of

society in general. Thus, religion functions to bind society's members by prompting them to affirm their common values and beliefs on a regular basis.

Weber, on the other hand, initiated a large-scale study of religions around the globe. His principal interest was, in large, global religions with millions of believers. The fundamental purpose of Weber's research was to discover religions' impacts on social changes. For example, in Protestantism, especially the Protestant Work Ethic, Weber saw the roots of capitalism. In the Eastern religions, Weber saw barriers to capitalism. For example, Hinduism stresses attaining higher levels of spirituality by escaping the toils of mundane physical world. Such a perspective does not easily lend itself to marketing and spending money. To Weber, Christianity was a salvation religion that claims people can be "saved" when they convert to certain beliefs and moral codes. In Christianity, the idea of "sin" and its punishment by God plays a fundamental role. Unlike the Eastern religions' passive approaches, salvation religions like Christianity are active, demanding continuous struggles against sin and the negative aspects of society.

Marx's views on the sociology of religion came from the 19th century philosophical and theological authors such as Ludwig Feuerbach who wrote *The Essence of Christianity*. Feuerbach maintained that people do not understand society, so they project their own culturally based norms and values onto separate entities such as gods, spirits, angels, and demons. According to Feuerbach, after humans realize that they have projected their own values onto religion, they can achieve these values in this world rather than in an afterlife.

Bott (1971) has worked on the family relationship and distinguished that the whole relationship of families has a connection with society. This means that every family is related to few persons in the society but some of them have a connected trellis which means that people with whom the family has connections are connected with each other too. He concluded that the distribution of family rules depends on the kind of social trellis. Those families who have the traditional distribution of rules have the connected family relationship meaning that their friends and relatives know each other, but the couple who are living together as partners has disturbed social trellis.

Beck-Gernsheim(2002) examined the ideas of structural theoreticians who consider couples as a housewife woman and a working man. He argues that the ideal pattern of structural families has the lowest level of expectation from the father-in-law and the couple are trying to provide his comfort against troubles in order for him to overcome the troubles and confirm his character in the family. According to Beck-Grenshim, this is not a family but a kind of single living which contains a wife and children. The whole effort of the wife is to keep her husband away from the family troubles and try to know her husband's troubles at work in order to be adjusted with them.

Duvall and Hill's (1957) theory has been referred to as family life cycle standpoint. According to this theory, the family relationships get more complex over time. Meanwhile, families have different temptations by passing the time: in the first years there is a very high level of happiness which will decrease in the middle years of marriage, and will increase in the last years of their marriage. Having a baby causes the reduction of marriage life satisfaction; meanwhile, responsibilities and hardworking reduce which will lead to satisfaction in the final years of married life.

According to Nye's theory, the relationship between couples is a kind of truck, if we consider their rights such as salaries and gifts, then it will be a truck circuit. On the other hand, the inequality between the salary and gift will cause feelings of unfairness; for instance, whenever any of the couples consider the outgoing of the relationship more than its incoming, then he or she will end up the relationship.

Finally, the family life cycle theory has been used as the main theoretical framework.

Figure 1: Conceptual Model

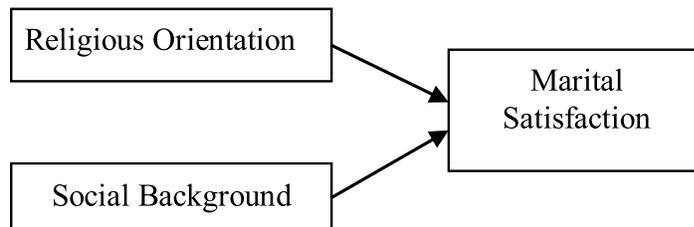
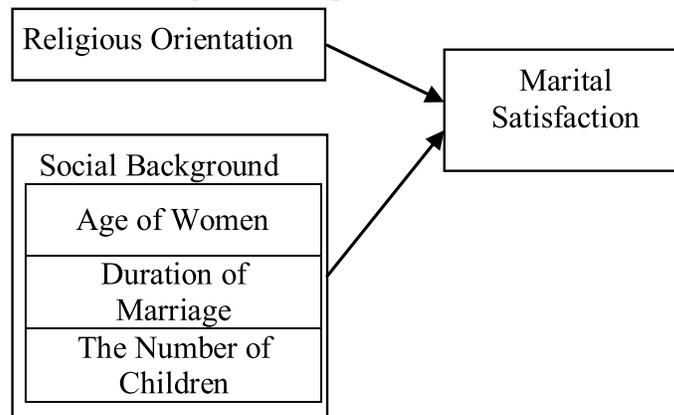


Figure 2: Experimental Model



## DATA AND METHOD

### Participants

Participants of this survey were married women living in two cities, one (Najafabad) is a western and the other (Fuladshahr) is a southwestern city in Isfahan Province. Systematic sampling of the population was used in this study. The criterion for inclusion was that participants be married women that their marriage had lasted for at least 3 years. The final sample included 757 participants, 381 from Najafabad (50.3 %) and 376 from Fuladshahr (49.7 %). Najafabad's women ranged in age from 17 to 70 (Mean = 35.74) and Fuladshahr's women from 16 to 74 (Mean = 35.12). The participants in Najafabad had been married on average for 14.07 years and had a mean of 2.25 children. The women who lived in Fuladshahr had been married, on average, for 13.94 years and had a mean of 2.02 children. With respect to the education, 4.7% of the Najafabad's women were illiterate, 16.3% had 5 years of schooling, 56.2% had 8-12 years and 22.8% had 13 or more. Of the Fuladshahr's women, 8.2% were illiterate, 21.8% had 5 years of schooling, 57.2% had 8-12 years and 12.8% had 13 or more. About 88.5% of the respondents in Najafabad and 74.7% of the women in Fuladshahr were housekeepers.

## INSTRUMENTS

### Background Questionnaire

The questionnaire, constructed specifically for this study, included queries designed to yield the following information: age of women,

duration of marriage, and number of children. Even though the primary questionnaire contained more variables like stressful events, economic situation of family, age differences among husbands and wives, occupational situation, educational level of women and so on, because the chosen framework of this study (life cycle standpoint) emphasizes on variables like marriage years, number of children, and age of women, other variables were allocated to another study.

### **THE RELIGIOUS ORIENTATION INVENTORY**

The religious orientation inventory (Allport & Ross, 1976) has been translated into Persian (Ketabi et al., 2004) to assess the level of religious orientations. To confirm the equivalence with the original version, the translation was back translated into English by native English speakers living in Iran. The inventory included a 10-item self-reporting measurement. It contained two sub-scales of inner-outer religious orientations. A sample item was: "Religion has the main role in human-being lives". Participants responded to items on a five point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (absolutely disagree) to 5 (absolutely agree). Three translators, all fluent in both Persian and English and knowledgeable in theology and sociology, performed the translation. Three additional translators, also fluent in both languages, translated the Persian version back into English.

The RO subscale scores were calculated by averaging the mean scores of the items in each category. The higher the score, the greater the subjective sense of well-being. The reliability in this study was fair, with  $\alpha = 0.62$ .

### **THE MARITAL SATISFACTION INVENTORY (LMI1)**

In the original version, marital satisfaction is measured by 27 statements pertaining to five dimensions: empathy, communication, affection, sexual satisfaction, and doing things together. For each statement, respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which it applied to them on a five-point Likert-like scale (1 = absolutely disagree to 5 = absolutely agree). Where necessary, the ratings were reversed so that the higher the rating, the better the marital satisfaction. The Persian version scale showed very high reliability ( $\alpha = 0.84$ ) in the sample. A sample item is "I feel

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<sup>4</sup> Lee Marital Index

affection from my spouse". Responses are on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (absolutely disagree) to 6 (absolutely agree), where a higher score indicates a higher level of satisfaction. Scores are calculated as the mean of the items and their range is therefore 1-5.

Studies have shown good test-retest and internal consistency reliability of the subscales and the total measure (Lee, 2006). The predictive validity of the scale has been supported in a number of studies (e.g., Lavee, Sharlin, & Katz, 1996; Lee & Wilson, 1998), as have its construct and discriminant validity. Lavee (1995) adapted the questionnaire to other populations. His version, used in this study, contains only 27 items. In the present study, Cronbach's alpha for the total sample was 0.84.

## **PROCEDURE**

Based on the random sampling, three students majoring in sociology and women studies interviewed the participants, clarified the aims of the study and promised that their responses would remain confidential. The questionnaires asked about their perceptions of their religious orientation and marital satisfaction along with a number of additional questions which will not be considered in the present study.

## **RESULTS**

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics of the respondents (RO and LMI scores). Pearson correlations among the research variables appear in Table 2. The age of woman was positively associated with duration of marriage, number of children, and religious orientation (i.e., the longer the age, the longer the duration of marriage and the greater the number of children and religious orientation), and negatively correlated with marital satisfaction score (i.e., the longer the age of woman, the lower the marital satisfaction). Duration of marriage was positively associated with the number of children, age of woman, and religious orientation (i.e., the longer the duration of marriage, the higher the number of children), and negatively correlated with marital satisfaction score. The number of children was negatively associated with marital satisfaction score. The marital satisfaction was positively associated with religious orientation score, negatively correlated with age of woman, duration of marriage and the number of children scores. Religious orientation was positively associated with the age of women, duration of marriage, number of

children, and marital satisfaction scores. City was positively correlated with duration of marriage, religious orientation, and marital satisfaction scores ( $p < 0.01$ ), and negatively correlated with age of woman and number of children scores ( $p < 0.01$ ).

Table 1: Means and standard deviations (S.D.) of LMI and RO scores (N = 757)

Research variables	Najafabad (n = 381)		Fuladshahr (n = 376)	
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.
Marital satisfaction	2.22	3.94	2.07	0.61
Religious orientation	1.62	0.56	1.65	0.55

Table 2: Intercorrelation matrix for all the research variables (N = 757)

	AW	DM	NC	MS	RO
AW	-	0.09	0.75	- 0.25	0.13
DM	0.09	-	0.75	- 0.25	0.19
NC	0.75	0.75	-	-0.28	0.09
MS	- 0.25	- 0.25	- 0.28	-	0.09
RO	0.13	0.19	0.09	0.19	-

Notes: \* $P < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ , AW= Age of Woman, DM= Duration of Marriage, NC= Number of Children, MS= Marital Satisfaction, RO= Religious orientation

To test the hypotheses regarding the correlation between religious orientation, duration of marriage, and the number of children with marital satisfaction, we opted for hierarchical regression analysis. Due to the high correlations between city and marital satisfaction, a series of two-tailed, independent samples t-tests, each with an alpha of 0.05, were run. Significant city differences were found, showing higher levels of marital satisfaction among Fuladshahr women and higher levels of women's age, duration of marriage, number of children, and religious orientation among Najafabad women. Accordingly, we conducted separate sets of hierarchical regression analysis for each city.

The number of children entered into the equation regression first. Participants' marital satisfaction served as the dependent variable. In the second step, Najafabad's religious orientation levels and duration of marriage scores were entered to examine the contribution of religious orientation to marital satisfaction. For Najafabad's women, marital satisfaction was inversely associated with number of children and

duration of marriage; as they became older and had more children, their level of satisfaction decreased, confirming hypotheses 2 and 4 (see Table 3). Partially supporting the first hypothesis, the regression analysis indicated a positive correlation between marital satisfaction and all subscales of religious orientation, in the sense that higher levels of inner-outer religious orientation were associated with higher marital satisfaction levels. Najafabad women's religious orientation and the number of children created a total R<sup>2</sup> of 0.14 that explained further variance in Najafabad's marital satisfaction scores (F = 20.87, p < 0.001).

Table 3: Results of hierarchical regression analysis, with marital satisfaction of Najafabad's women as dependent variable (n = 376)

Independent variables		Variable		
		R <sup>2</sup>	β	T
<b>Step 1</b>				
NC	MS	-0.17	-2.43*	0.07
<b>Step 2</b>				
RO	MS	0.24	5.08**	0.13
DM		-0.17	-2.33*	0.14

Notes: \*P < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01, MS = Marital Satisfaction, NC = Number of Children, RO = Religious Orientation, DM = Duration of Marriage

For women living in Fuladshahr, marital satisfaction was positively associated with religious orientation, indicating that their marital satisfaction will increase if their religious orientation increases. The regression analyses also yield negative correlations between marital satisfaction and duration of marriage. Then, Fuladsharian's marital satisfaction decreased with time (see Table 4). As can be seen, the model explained 12% of the variance in the marital satisfaction of Fuladshahr's women (F = 25.74, P < 0.01).

Table 4: Results of hierarchical regression analysis, with marital satisfaction of Fuladshahr's Women as dependent variable (n = 381)

Independent variables		Variable		
		R <sup>2</sup>	β	T
<b>Step 1</b>				
DM	MS	-0.31	-6.44**	0.10
<b>Step 2</b>				
RO	MS	0.13	2.79**	0.12

Notes: \*P < 0.05; \*\*p < 0.01, MS= Marital Satisfaction, DM= Duration of Marriage, RO= Religious Orientation

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study indicate that marital satisfaction of wives was affected by their religious orientation. It provides partial support for the assumption that religious orientation is positively related to marital satisfaction, confirming the first research hypothesis and supporting previous findings (e.g., Call & Heaton, 1997; Edgell, 2005; Mahoney, 2003; Lichter & Carmalt, 2009; Wilcox, 2006).

The study findings also revealed that the relation between city and marital satisfaction was significant at 0.05 level. The marital satisfaction of Fuladshahr women was higher than that of Najafabad women. There are several possible reasons for this finding. There may be cultural, social, and religious differences between the two cities that led to differences in the marriage perceptions of these women and their expectations of the relationship. According to Minot et al. (2008), community affects the quality of marital satisfaction and the relation between couples. The broad theoretical background for this study is provided by family life cycle theory. According to this theory, in the first years, there is a very high level of happiness which will decrease during the middle years of marriage and will increase in the last years of their marriage. Having a baby causes the reduction of marriage life satisfaction, meanwhile the reduction of responsibilities and hardworking will cause satisfaction in the final years. Findings showed that in both cities an increase in the number of children causes decrease in marital satisfaction.

Another city differences revealed in this study was that marital satisfaction was U-shape for Najafabad women, characterized by high marital happiness in the early (or pre-parental) years of marriage, a decline in marital happiness during the middle (or parental) years, and a rise in marital happiness in the later (or post-parental) years (e.g., Anderson et al., 1983). Contrary to previous findings, the marital satisfaction of Fuladshahr women decreases as they grow older. This finding partially supports the findings of Tremblay et al. (2002) who found that marital satisfaction decreases among women as they become older. Blood and Wolf (1960) found a gradual decline in marital satisfaction throughout the child-rearing years, a slight rise after the launching of children and a further decline through the years of retirement.

Today's women in developing countries like Iran often develop professional careers, but are still intensely involved in caring for home and children. As the number of children rises with the years of marriage, women find themselves inundated with the tiring daily home-related functions. It is also possible that, due to cultural and biological differences, women experience lower levels of satisfaction in the course of life. The current findings indicate a need for further examination of gender differences in this respect.

The research has several limitations. Firstly, marital satisfaction is a problem that belongs to individuals' private zones in Iran. Therefore, participants hardly trust investigators. Most of the participants, especially Najafabad women, avoided answering the questionnaires because of their husbands. Secondly, police agents were not convinced enough to cooperate. Thirdly, because our questionnaires were to be filled within the period of Ramadan- the fasting month-, people did not feel fresh enough to respond. Fourthly, some married women, who were not well aware of such concepts as orgasm or due to embarrassment, which is culturally bounded, answered wrongly.

Further studies are required to determine the generalizability of findings among both wives and husbands. Thus, further research on enduring marriages is recommended using heterogeneous samples consist of both men and women. Furthermore, qualitative methods might be better to study women issues.

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