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Marital satisfaction among girls with early marriage in Iran: emotional intelligence and religious orientation

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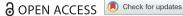
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates marital satisfaction, emotional intelligence, and religious orientation among women with early marriage in Iran. The 'emotional intelligence scale', 'religious orientation scale' and 'marital satisfaction scale' were used and a rare set of data from 194 women with early marriage were collected. The results of Pearson's correlation showed a significant relationship between emotional intelligence and marital satisfaction ($P < 0.001$, $r = 0.38$), and age at marriage and marital satisfaction ($P < 0.005$, $r = 0.20$). The results of the multiple linear regression analysis showed that emotional intelligence ($P < 0.001$, $B = 0.33$) and age at marriage ($P < 0.05$, $B = 0.90$) are predictive of marital satisfaction among girls with early marriage in Iran and explain 16.4% of the variation of women's marital satisfaction. A greater understanding of the factors increasing or reducing the marital satisfaction may help the marital satisfaction of women with early marriage in Iran.

Introduction

Though early marriage is forbidden based on the national laws and international agreements, a large number of adolescent girls get married all over the world. More than 67 million women (aged 20–24) got married before the age of 18 years in 2010 all over the world. Twelve percent of these women have been married before age 15. The early marriage rate changes significantly from country to country. For instance, it varies from 45% to 40 %, and 26 % in South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean, respectively (UNICEF, 2007, cited in Segal-Engelchin, Huss, & Massry, 2016).

Due to the broad effects of marriage on women's lives, in particular, researchers, lawyers, and policymakers have made many attempts to consider marriage especially in terms of consent and age from human rights perspective (Jensen & Thornton, 2003). For instance, Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights emphasizes that 'Marriage shall be entered into only with the full consent of spouses' (UNICEF, 2005).

There are a variety of laws on legal age for marriage in different countries. Though the legal age of marriage for girls is 18 years in most of the developing countries (Loaiza & Wong, 2012), different countries have different laws in this regard. According to Article 1041 of the Civil Code in Iran, the legal age of marriage for girls is 13; sometimes, it is also possible to get married at lower ages with parental consent (Eftekhar Zadeh, 2015). According to the last report of the Organization for Civil Registration of Iran, about 13,820 cases of girls under the age of 18 years were married in the first 9 months of 2016 (*https://www.sabteahval.ir/en*). At the time of their marriage, most of these young women have limited rights to choose when and who to marry because these are arranged by parents.

Due to its various potential effects on physical, mental and emotional growth of women, marriage at an early age often causes concern. First of all, early marriage means early childbirth. Substantial studies indicated that early birth has negative impacts on the woman and the child (Rubertsson, Hellström, Cross, & Sydsjö, 2014; Senderowitz, 1995). Second, early marriage often obstructs women's education as they are expected to devote more time to household and parenting. Moreover, studies have found that early marriage among women has an adverse impact on their mental health (Forthofer, Kessler, Story, & Gotlib, 1996; Gotlib, Lewinsohn, and Seeley, 1998 as cited in Uecker, 2012). Finally, there is a concern of power balance in the relationship between a husband and his young wife. Women who marry at an early age are less capable to assert themselves and establish their position versus husband. Therefore, they may possess less power, status, and autonomy within the house (Jensen & Thornton, 2003; Nguyen & Wodon, 2014; Shabir & Nisar, 2015).

Research articles conducted in Iran have reported the negative outcomes of early marriage. A recent study conducted by Eftekhar Zadeh (2015) showed that early marriage can be a positive factor in the occurrence of domestic violence and girls' drop out of school. Additionally, it revealed that early marriage leads to women exploitation in work including domestic work, rural or out-of-home employment. Early marriage can lead to harassment and exploitation of women, affect their sexual health and leads to physical and mental diseases and causes an increase in pregnancy and premature birth (Meghdadi & Javadpour, 2017). It has been suggested in Iran that girls who have the opportunity to develop positive relational skills may have higher success in their marriage. However, before the rights of adolescent girls are resolved in countries like Iran where early marriage is acceptable, the well-being of these young women is a pressing issue. One important possibility is studying the marital satisfaction in early marriages.

Marital satisfaction

Marital satisfaction is a complex process affected by a variety of factors such as education, socio-economic class, love, commitment, marital communication, conflict, gender, existence of children, sexual relations and the division of tasks at different times (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992; Schoenfeld, Loving, Pope, Huston, & Štulhofer, 2017). Numerous marital satisfaction studies focused on the age of marriage (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007; Booth & Edwards, 1985; Jackson, Rogers, & Sartor, 2016). The literature provides no systematic theory to explain marital outcomes pattern by age at first marriage; however, it provides a variety of theoretical perspectives or theoretical fragments of theoretical reasoning (Glenn, Uecker, & Love, 2010). There is consensus on the existence of an inverse relationship between initial marriage age and the likelihood of divorce in that the lower the age of marriage, the higher the likelihood of divorce (Amato et al., 2007; Lee, 1977; Tilson & Larsen, 2000). Studies have also indicated the age at the time of marriage as one of the most important factors in predicting marital satisfaction and stability, as well as the sexual adjustment (Bumpass & Sweet, 1972; Dabone, 2012; Jose & Alfons, 2007; Rotz, 2016).

The current research investigates the role of two variables including emotional intelligence and religious orientation in the marital satisfaction of women who got married at an early age.

Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence (EI) is the capacity to perceive, express, recognize, use and manage a person's and other persons' emotions (Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2017). In Goleman's (2001) view, emotional intelligence is the ability to manage mood, mental status and control impulses in a desirable way. Sternberg (2000) introduced two models titled as the 'ability model' and 'mixed model'. The ability model defined EI as a set of abilities of information processing (such as high precision in the assessment of expressed emotions type through facial expression). It emphasizes EI as cognitive abilities and usually needs high performance and is measured through answering emotional intelligence tests and direct assessment of emotions management. On the other hand,

the mixed model investigates mental abilities and personal traits (such as empathy) and measures EI through self-reporting of how emotions are managed in life. Bar-On (2004) believes that emotional intelligence is a set of abilities and skills that equip a person to adapt to the environment and succeed. Bar-On model of emotional-social intelligence (2004) includes the following 15 components: emotional self-awareness, assertiveness, self-regard, self-actualization, independence, and empathy, interpersonal relationship, responsibility, problem-solving, reality testing, flexibility, stress tolerance, impulse control, happiness, and optimism.

Specialists and researchers who investigate emotional intelligence believe that emotional intelligence can have important applications and effects on various human activities such as leadership, professional growth, mental health, family and marital life (Batool & Khalid, 2009). Goleman (2001) reported a strong relationship between emotional intelligence and the successful resolution of conflict and interpersonal relations and highlighted the importance of empathy in romantic relationships (cited by Batool & Khalid, 2009). In a study, Schutte et al. (2001) concluded that persons with higher emotional intelligence cooperate more with their spouses and enjoy a higher marital satisfaction. In another research conducted on 316 women aged 25–65, Lavalekar, Kulkarni, and Jagtap (2010) concluded that there is a positive significant correlation between emotional intelligence and marital satisfaction. In an analytical research, Batool and Khalid (2009) showed that some of the emotional intelligence components (such as optimism, empathy, expressing emotions, emotional self-awareness and impulse control) play a more important role in couples' relations. In addition, the research conducted by Aliakbari-Dehkordi (2012) yielded a positive significant relationship between women's emotional intelligence and their marital satisfaction and their husbands' marital satisfaction. Furthermore, women and their husbands' emotional intelligence explain 35 % of the variance in women's marital satisfaction.

Moreover, some studies have found that emotional intelligence is lower in young women than older women (Extremera, Fernández-Berrocal, & Salovey, 2006; Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 1999). Furthermore, emotional intelligence can be improved by training (Fariselli, Ghini, & Freedman, 2008). Therefore, according to these findings, if we can show that emotional intelligence has a significant relationship with marital satisfaction in women with early marriage, it can be then suggested that young girls should receive emotional intelligence training to increase marital satisfaction and hopefully help improve their mental health.

Thus far, previous studies have investigated individuals who were married above 18, but the role of emotional intelligence in the marital satisfaction of girls who got married early was not investigated. Focusing on girls who married early, the current research hopes to plug the gap so as to improve the wellbeing of these girls and women, if appropriate.

Religious orientation

Religion is one of the most powerful forces in human culture. Though religion is a subjective concept and it is difficult to describe it discursively, experiences and methods that form our religion can be remarkable. Religion is inspiring of intense emotions both in religious and non-religious persons. It widely affects personal and public life by providing a community of believers to talk to each other and also to be a basis for private thinking and personal growth. According to Allport and Ross (1967), religion can play an important role in persons becoming mellow, and beliefs can organize their lives and make them more productive. Religion can also create a deep feeling of self-worth (Hill & Pargament, 2008) and improve the individuals' self-regulation and self-control (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). On a relational level, religion has also been reported to improve and strengthen marital relationships (Call & Heaton, 1997). Religious orientation can affect the marital relationship because religion includes guidelines for life and presents beliefs and values system, which can influence marital life (Hünler & Gençöz, 2005). Several studies examined the significant relationship between religion and marital satisfaction. Hatch et al. (2016) have found that prayer and praise improve the marital relationship quality. Ghafouri, Ghanbari, Fallahzadeh, and Shokri (2016) concluded that there is a positive relationship between marital

adjustment and religious orientation. David and Stafford (2015) found that the individual relationship with God indirectly affects marital quality analyzed of 342 heterosexual married couples. In addition, religious communication has a stronger relationship with marital satisfaction among couples.

Despite the existence of research indicating that emotional intelligence and religious orientation are related to marital satisfaction, there is little research to show the effect of these two variables on marital satisfaction in girls who married early. Therefore, the current research seeks to answer the question: Do emotional intelligence and religious satisfaction have a significant effect on marital satisfaction of women who married early?

Method

Population and sample

The population of the present study included women with an early marriage (marriage at an age of lower than 18 years old). Two phases of the sampling techniques were used in order to the select the participants. In the first phase of sampling, the network sampling techniques were used from August to October, 2016 so as to identify the women experiencing an early marriage in Lordegan city, Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province, Iran. Network sampling was used for selecting the sample of the study because it was difficult to identify the aforementioned population. First, several members with an early marriage were identified and then asked to introduce the individuals with a similar experience (marriage at an age lower than 18 years old). In the second phase, the participants were selected as the final sample of the research based on the following criteria.

The most important criterion to select sample was living with husband. Considering this criterion, women who got married before the age of 18 years but had lost their husband due to divorce or death were removed from the research sample. In fact, all sample members were above 18 and had experienced an early marriage. The criterion for an early marriage was getting married before the age of 18 years. Actually, the sample had the following characteristics: they were above the age of 18 years; they got married before 18 and had not experienced remarriage, divorce and husband's death.

In order to examine the abovementioned criteria, a demographic questionnaire was developed by the researcher and distributed among all participants. Then, 186 participants who lacked the above criteria based on their response were excluded from the final sample. At last, 194 people who had all of the above criteria were determined as the participants of the study. After sampling, the researcher and the research assistant (in some cases) met each of the participants in their home and explained the research objectives, processes, instruments, and the release of findings to them.

Participants were assured that their personal information will be kept confidential, and the informed consent was obtained from all participants. Moreover, the procedure followed in the study was approved by the institutional research committee of Shahrekord University, which monitored the research implementation process and approved that ethical considerations in research have been respected.

Moreover, the researcher provided those participants who needed treatment with a counselor or psychologist during or after research (because of collecting sensitive data). However, no participant asked for treatment during and after treatment.

Data collection instruments

The following three questionnaires were used for data collection. It should be noted that all questionnaires were exactly standardized/normalized in Iran:

ENRICH marital satisfaction scale

This inventory was developed by Olson, Fournier & Druckhman (1989, cited in Salimaniyan & Mohammadi 2009) in order to assess the potential problematic areas or to detect power and marital relationship enrichment areas. The main version of the test with 115 items includes 12 sub-scales. This scale was normalized by Salimaniyan and Mohammadi (2009) in Iran and the number of items was reduced from 115 to 47. In the current research, the version with 47 items normalized in Iran was used. Using Cronbach's Alpha, Salimaniyan and Mohammadi (2009) reported the reliability of the questionnaire to be 0.90.

The emotional quotient inventory

It is a self-report scale. Its main version with 133 items can be implemented individually or in group. It is scored in a 5-point scale ranging from completely disagree to completely agree. Its Persian version with 90 items has become normalized in the academic community of Iran (Azadi & Tehrani, 2010). In this scale, getting score is more indicating the higher emotional intelligence. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the main form was reported to be 0.76 (Bar-On, Brown, Kirkcaldy, & Thome, 2000). Cronbach's alpha and split-half coefficients for the Persian version were reported to be 0.93 and 0.88, respectively (Azadi & Tehrani, 2010).

Allport religious orientation.

*In 1967, Allport and Ross introduced a scale to determine persons' religious orientation. This scale includes two intrinsic and extrinsic orientations. Intrinsic orientation reflects persons' interest in religion itself and is an internal issue while extrinsic orientation is an external issue and is a tool used to satisfy persons' needs including rank and security. Allport religious orientation questionnaire includes 21 statements with no time limit. It is applicable for 16- year-old persons and older (*Janbozorgi, 2007). *Its internal consistency and test-retest reliability were obtained to be 0.71 and 0.74 using Cronbach's alpha and test-retest reliability, respectively (Janbozorgi, 2007).*

Statistical analysis

In the current research, SPSS 19 was used. In the descriptive statistics level, mean and standard deviation and on the inferential statistics level, Pearson correlation and multiple regression analysis were used.

Results

The mean and standard deviation of the research sample age were found to be 30.17 and 9.78, respectively. The sample was in the age range of 18–63 years. In this study, 118 persons (60.8 %) got married at the age of 17, 30 persons (15.5 %) at 16, 20 persons (10.3 %) at 15, 6 persons (3.1 %) at 14, 12 persons (6.2 %) at 13, 6 persons (3.1 %) at 12, and 2 persons (1.0 %) got married at 9. The mean and standard deviation of the length of marriage for the sample group were 13.25 and 10.15, respectively. The mean and standard deviation of the *age difference* between *spouses* at *marriage* were 6.36 and 4.81, respectively. Considering educational level, amongst the total number of sample, 25 persons (12.9 %) were illiterate, 68 persons (35.1 %) were at the primary level of education, 39 persons (20.1 %) were at the secondary level of education, 56 persons (28.9 %) held diploma, and 6 persons (3.1 %) held a bachelor's degree. Regarding the number of children, 30 persons (15.5 %) had one child, 66 persons (34.0 %) had 2 children, 40 persons (20.6 %) had 3 children, 14 persons (7.2 %) had 4 children, 24 persons (12.4 %) had 5 children, 12 persons (6.2 %) had 6 children, 6 persons (3.1 %) had 7 children, and 2 persons (1.0 %) had 8 children. The mean and standard deviation of the marital satisfaction, intrinsic religious orientation, extrinsic religious orientation, and emotional intelligence were obtained to be 185.51 and 31.89, 25.40 and 16.64, 27.09 and 9.44, and 322.76 and 34.07, respectively.

In order to *ensure that the assumptions* of normality are met, linearity and even distribution around the regression line were met with *no* significant *violations; preliminary data analyses were used*. To test *assumptions* of normality of data, Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was utilized. The *results* of this study *showed that z statistic for criterion variable* (marital satisfaction) was equal to 0.81. The normality assumption was met at the significance level of 0.05 (P > 0.05). *Tolerance* indices and variance inflation factor (VIF) were used to test the multicollinearity assumption. The tolerance coefficient ranging from 0 to 1 shows to what extent independent variables are linearly correlated. Therefore, the higher the tolerance (close to 1), the lower the collinearity and vice versa, the lower the tolerance (close to 0), the higher the collinearity. VIF is obtained by dividing 1 by tolerance value. If VIF is greater than 2, the collinearity will be higher. Generally, if the tolerance index is lower than 0.1 and VIF index is higher than 10, this assumption violation will be apparent. The presented values of these 2 statistics (Table 1) for the variables under study show that this assumption is not violated. Moreover, in order to test the independence of errors, Durbin-Watson test was used. If this statistic value is 1.5–2.5, this assumption is not violated. The value of this statistic was obtained to be 2.21; therefore, the assumption of the independence of errors was met.

Pearson correlation test showed that emotional intelligence and marital satisfaction are significantly directly correlated (r = 0.38, P < 0.001), but there was no significant relationship between intrinsic religious orientation and marital satisfaction (r = 0.08, P > 0.05). Additionally, no significant relationship was found between extrinsic religious orientation and marital satisfaction (r = −0.02, P > 0.05). Considering demographic variables, Pearson correlation test revealed a significant direct correlation between marital satisfaction and the age at marriage (r = 0.20, P < 0.04), but no significant relationship was found between the age of the sample group (r = −0.06, P = 0.38), *age difference* between *spouses* (r = −0.06, P = 0.37), the length of marriage (r = 0.01, P = 0.83), number of children (r = −0.01, P = 0.83), educational level (r = 0.008, P = 0.91), and marital satisfaction. Therefore, of demographic variables, only the age at marriage variable was entered into regression equation due to having a significant relationship with marital satisfaction along with emotional intelligence, which had a significant relationship with marital satisfaction. The results of the regression analysis showed that the regression model was significant (R^2 = 16.4%, F = 18.77, P < 0.001) and 16.4 % of marital satisfaction is explained based on the predictor variables. Regression coefficients indicate that emotional intelligence (P = 0.001, t = 5.29) and the age at marriage (P = 0.04, t = 2.02) can be predictive of marital satisfaction variance in women who married at an early age (Table 1).

Table 1 shows standardized and unstandardized coefficients for significant variables in predicting marital satisfaction variable. Unstandardized regression coefficients (B) are coefficients of the estimated regression model; in the current research, B values for emotional intelligence and spouses' age difference were found to be 0.30 and 0.90, respectively. Standard coefficients or β are measured based on the standard unit. *The higher the* β *value, the greater the impact* of the *predictor variable* on the *criterion variable*. β *value* for emotional intelligence is 0.35, showing that one standard deviation shift in emotional intelligence variable leads to 0.35 standard deviation shift in criterion variable (marital satisfaction). β *value* for emotional intelligence is 0.13, indicating that one standard deviation shift in the age at marriage variable leads to 0.13 standard deviation shift in the criterion variable (marital satisfaction).

Table 1. Estimation of regression coefficients of marital satisfaction based on criterion variables in women who married at an early age.

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			Collinearity Statistic	
	B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig	Tolerance	VIF
Emotional Intelligence	.33	.06	.35	5.29	.000	0.96	1.03
Age at marriage	.90	.44	.13	2.02	0.04	0.96	1.03

Discussion

The objective of this study was to investigate the role of emotional intelligence and religious orientation variables in marital satisfaction level in women who were married at an early age. The results of Pearson correlation test showed that there is a positive significant relationship between emotional intelligence and marital satisfaction, but no significant relationship was observed between different religious orientations (intrinsic and extrinsic) and marital satisfaction in girls with marriage before the age of 18 years. In addition, based on the results of the regression analysis, it can be said that 16.4 % of the marital satisfaction variance can be explained by emotional intelligence and age at marriage.

The positive role of emotional intelligence in marital satisfaction has been supported (Batool & Khalid, 2009; Lavalekar et al., 2010; Schutte et al., 2001; Stevens & Stevens, 2006) concluded that there is a positive significant correlation between emotional intelligence and marital satisfaction. Though Rauer and Volling (2005) found that emotional expressiveness (as one of the emotional intelligence components) had a positive relationship with marital satisfaction in women but such a relationship was not found for men.

The current research yielded no significant relationship between religious orientation and marital satisfaction in women with marriage at an early age. This finding was in contrast with the results obtained by most of the studies. Previous studies have shown a positive relationship between religious orientation and marital satisfaction (Dudley & Kosinski, 1990; Olson et al., 2015; Rasouli & Soltani, 2012; Yeganeh & Shaikhmahmoodi, 2013).

Perhaps, this inconsistency can be explained by referring to the age of the sample group. In addition, the socio-economic status of the women interviewed needs to be duly considered. Amato and Previti (2003) showed that in high socio-economic classes, the difference between values plays a role in marital satisfaction and thus divorce, but in low socio-economic classes, factors such as poverty and addiction affect marital satisfaction. As the majority of sample group belong to low socio-economic classes (Lordegn city has a low status with regard to cultural and economic context), it can be said that values conflict (especially spirituals and religious values) has not been a very fundamental issue for the group. Moreover, in another explanation, perhaps we can refer to the lack of knowledge about other personality and mental traits of the sample group. Sullivan (2001) found that religion has a negative effect on neurotic couples. It seems that religious orientation has more positive effects if couples have less neurosis. For further research, it is suggested to investigate the personal traits of the sample group as well as the religious orientation of sample group husbands to present a more exact explanation about recent findings. The current research focused on the importance of emotional intelligence and religious orientation in marital satisfaction. The results showed that emotional intelligence affects marital satisfaction in different ways. This research will have important implications for pre-marital counseling programmers. For instance, couples can be empowered assessing the couples' emotional intelligence before marriage and offering the required training, where appropriate.

Furthermore, the results of the current research showed that of the demographic variables, the age at marriage has a significant direct relationship with marital satisfaction. This result is in agreement with those obtained by most of the studies (Jose & Alfons, 2007; Lee, 1977). People who get married at older ages have a higher level of maturity and emotional behavioral skills, use more effective strategies to cope with conflicts and problems, and therefore, are expected to have greater marital satisfaction.

The current research had some limitations. First, it focused only on women who got married at an early age and their husbands were not studied. Second, due to the quantitative approach of this research, it was impossible to investigate the processes related to marital satisfaction more deeply. It would be suggested that both men and women be included in future research and a qualitative method be used to better understand the processes related to marital satisfaction of women who got married at an early age. In addition, as the current research showed that emotional intelligence

is related to marital satisfaction of women who got married at an early age, it is suggested to give emotional intelligence training to women with early marriage.

It should be noted that the current research by no means justifies the early marriage of women. The aim of the authors is only to investigate the role of a number of variables in marital satisfaction of women who got married at an early age. The authors believe that more attempts should be made to reduce early marriage in countries such as Iran.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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