

## Explaining the Factors Related to the Enrichment of Marriage in the Marriage Contract Stage: A Grounded Theory Study

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study aimed to analyze the factors influencing the enrichment of couples' relationships during the Marriage Contract Stage—a period in Iranian culture following the formal marriage contract ceremony, where couples are legally married but have not yet held their wedding celebration.

**Methods and Materials:** The research employed a qualitative methodology using grounded theory. The study sample comprised engaged couples living in Tehran. Participant selection continued until theoretical saturation was reached, resulting in a total of 11 paired interviews (22 individual interviews). Data collection was conducted through semi-structured individual interviews, and the data were analyzed using the three-step coding process—open, axial, and selective coding—based on the method proposed by Corbin and Strauss.

**Findings:** The analysis identified 105 primary codes, which were organized into 14 subcategories: self-esteem, expressing intimacy and empathy, creating shared meaning, love, sincere communication patterns, recognizing each other's needs, compatibility, resolving marital conflicts, compromising styles, acceptance of responsibility, non-acceptance and accountability, non-forgiveness, self-management, and relationship management. These subcategories were further grouped into 5 main categories. Overall, the findings suggest that the enrichment of marriage during the Marriage Contract Stage is not spontaneous or unilateral; rather, it is influenced by multiple factors that can either enhance or diminish the quality of life for couples.

**Conclusion:** Marital enrichment requires mutual effort to maintain and improve the relationship.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Marital Relations, Grounded Theory, Self-Concept, Interpersonal Relations.

## 1. Introduction

The family, the fundamental unit of society, is formed through the bond between husband and wife, known as marriage. Marriage is one of the most significant events in a person's life, serving as a cornerstone of human society. It represents the first emotional and legal commitment that an individual assumes in adulthood (Devlin et al., 2024; Park, 2021). As one of the most complex types of human relationships, the marital bond has a unique capacity to elicit deep emotions, a phenomenon rarely seen in other interpersonal connections (Sarokhani, 2018). Research indicates that over 90% of men and women worldwide marry at some point in their lives (Payne, 2019). As one of the oldest human institutions, marriage profoundly influences personal development and plays a crucial role in shaping an individual's life direction (Bean et al., 2020; Zali et al., 2019).

One of the critical stages of marriage is the Marriage Contract Stage. This period, often considered the best time for mutual understanding, allows couples to become acquainted with each other's moods and behaviors. Referred to as the "golden period" of married life, this stage prepares couples for the shared responsibilities and experiences of marriage (Kim et al., 2020). However, this period is not without its challenges. Events that occur during this time can significantly impact the relationship, with their effects varying depending on the nature of the events (Kanter et al., 2018; Rose et al., 2019). Developing and maintaining intimate relationships and fulfilling emotional and psychological needs during the Marriage Contract Stage requires a combination of mental health, logical attitudes, and the acquisition of specific skills (Bahonar et al., 2020). Contentment, satisfaction, and happiness in marriage do not arise spontaneously; they require sustained effort from both partners to preserve the health of the relationship. As a result, marriages can either thrive or falter. Ultimately, each marriage contributes to an individual's overall life outcome, determining whether it is viewed as successful or unsuccessful (BahadorMotlagh et al., 2024; Segrin & Flora, 2004).

A successful marriage requires awareness of the key areas of communication, enabling couples to recognize their strengths and identify potential problems and concerns. Research by Elgar, Craig, and Trites (2012) demonstrated that in successful marriages, couples invest more time in their relationship and maintain strong connections in social spheres (Elgar et al., 2012). Similarly, Dong and Xiao (2010)

found that happy Chinese couples exhibited close and intimate relationships, strong family ties, harmony, sexual satisfaction, social support, mutual understanding, and independence from their families of origin (Dong & Xiao, 2010). Khodadadi Sengdeh et al. (2014) also identified marital factors such as mutual support, intimacy, gratitude, commitment, efforts to please each other, sexual satisfaction, and marital agreement as pivotal in forming a successful and healthy marriage (Khodadadi Sangdeh et al., 2015). Furthermore, Shirdel and Shojaei Baghini (2015) discovered that trust, agreement on fundamental life issues (such as career decisions, having children, education, and sexual relations), responsibility, cultural customs similarity, understanding in religious beliefs, and adherence to spiritual and moral standards significantly contribute to a successful marriage (Shirdel & Shujaei Baghini, 2015). What is clear is that a stable and successful relationship requires the efforts of both partners. Focusing on the factors that contribute to marital stability provides insights that can be valuable in fostering and promoting stable marriages within society (Cobbinah & Osei-Tutu, 2019). Marriage enrichment is one of the indicators of a suitable married life (Neswiswa & Jacobs, 2024; Piao et al., 2020). Time is defined along with high marital satisfaction (Gregory, 2019). In the enrichment of marriage, couples are vaccinated against risk factors such as irrational beliefs and protective factors such as positive attitudes and sincere emotional interactions and satisfying relationships are strengthened (Berger & Hannah, 1999; Kiani et al., 2021).

Since the inception of marriage enrichment programs, various initiatives have been developed. Although these programs may differ somewhat in terms of implementation and content, they all share a common goal: to strengthen relationships, enhance interpersonal skills, and prevent marital tensions. It is important to note that marriage empowerment programs are not therapeutic in nature. Instead, they are designed for couples who are already aware of the strengths and weaknesses in their relationships and are motivated to improve them. A key benefit of these programs is that they equip couples with skills that help them address unmet needs with greater knowledge and awareness. Additionally, participants learn to avoid viewing divorce as the first solution when problems arise, and instead focus on rebuilding their relationship (Menteş & Yıldırım, 2024).

Prominent examples of these programs include Dinkmeyer and Carlson's Marriage Communication Enrichment Program, the Practical Application of Intimate Relationship Skills, the Relationship Advancement

Program, the Marriage Encounter Weekend, the Training Program for Living Together, and the Intimacy Training Program for Couples, which reviews spousal relationships (Keshavarz Afshar & Bahner, 2022). Research by Batik and Kalkan (2019) demonstrated that marital relationship enrichment programs effectively increase marital satisfaction before childbirth and help maintain it afterward (Batik & Kalkan, 2019). Similarly, studies by Doss et al. (2019) and Navidian et al. (2017) found that these programs positively impact marital satisfaction, intimacy, sexual satisfaction, and the overall quality of marital relationships (Doss et al., 2019; Navidian et al., 2017). Zia and Safarzadeh (2023) concluded that emotional enrichment education during pregnancy improves emotional empathy, perceptions of fairness, and sexual desires among young couples (Zia & Safarzadeh, 2023). Moreover, marriage enrichment has proven beneficial even for couples who have experienced marital infidelity. Therefore, enrichment programs are meaningful for couples at various levels of prevention (Agha Mirzaei et al., 2023).

Given the wide scope of marriage enrichment programs and their impact on the evolving challenges and opportunities in couples' lifestyles, this research aims to analyze the concept of marriage enrichment among Iranian married couples. In contemporary society, couples often face severe and pervasive challenges in establishing and maintaining romantic relationships. Issues related to marital satisfaction and instability are among the leading reasons for seeking mental health care, surpassing other psychological concerns. Enhancing marital satisfaction and stability reduces many psychological, emotional, and social problems within families and society. It also improves marital satisfaction and compatibility, contributing to overall stability and peace of mind, allowing individuals to focus more on personal growth, excellence, and contributing to social, cultural, and economic progress (Lambie et al., 2023). Families also benefit from this progress.

Furthermore, this research may provide valuable insights for counseling centers, guiding interventions aimed at increasing the stability of marital relationships through couples therapy. A stable and satisfying marital relationship offers numerous benefits, including improved mental and physical health, and creates a supportive environment for children's development and the well-being of other family members (Michalitsianos, 2014). Identifying the factors that contribute to marital enrichment is crucial for filling the research gap in this area and understanding the concept of marital enrichment within the context of Iranian culture.

Therefore, this study seeks to answer the question: What are the factors that influence the enrichment of a couple's marriage during the Marriage Contract Stage?

## 2. Methods and Materials

### 2.1. Study design and Participant

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach, specifically employing the grounded theory method. Given the lack of prior research on developing a conceptual model of the factors influencing marital enrichment in Iran, the researchers determined that grounded theory was the most suitable method. The research field encompassed all couples in the Marriage Contract Stage between October 2021 and October 2022 in Tehran. The selection of participants in grounded theory studies typically begins with purposive sampling and transitions to theoretical sampling as the study progresses. Initially, purposive sampling was employed to identify key concepts or categories through interviews with individuals who had more profound knowledge and experience. As these categories emerged, theoretical sampling was used to gather additional data and either confirm or refine the identified categories. In theoretical sampling, more targeted questions were introduced to guide the data collection process. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning that no new information was being added to the study. In total, 11 paired interviews (22 individual interviews) were conducted.

To minimize heterogeneity among participants, specific inclusion criteria were established: (1) a willingness to participate in the research, (2) couples who were interested in addressing issues related to the Marriage Contract Stage and in learning effective communication skills, without acute or serious conflicts and not seeking divorce, (3) residency in Tehran, (4) no history of chronic physical or mental illness, (5) a minimum educational level of a high school diploma, (6) not currently participating in other counseling or psychotherapy sessions, and (7) ages between 24 and 40 years. Participants were recruited through announcements on social networks and direct engagement by researchers at psychotherapy and counseling clinics. Upon visiting these centers, researchers explained the study's goals and the importance of the research, along with general interview questions. Couples who expressed interest in participating were offered a complimentary counseling session as a token of appreciation.

## 2.2. Measures

### 2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

The Psychological Flexibility Questionnaire developed by Dennis and Vanderwal (2010) was used to measure psychological flexibility. This 20-item self-report scale assesses the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and respond flexibly to thoughts and emotions. The items on the questionnaire evaluate three dimensions of psychological flexibility: (a) the willingness to perceive difficult situations as manageable, (b) the ability to generate alternative interpretations for life events and behaviors, and (c) the capacity to find multiple solutions for challenging situations. The responses are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with reverse scoring for certain items. Higher scores indicate greater psychological flexibility. In the original study by Dennis and Vanderwal (2010), the concurrent validity of the scale was established with a correlation of  $-0.39$  with the Beck Depression Inventory, and a convergent validity coefficient of  $0.75$  with the Cognitive Flexibility Scale developed by Martin and Robin. The reliability of the scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielding values of  $0.91$  for the total scale,  $0.84$  for the manageability perception subscale, and  $0.91$  for the alternative options subscale. In Iran, Sharreh and colleagues (2013) reported a test-retest reliability coefficient of  $0.71$  and a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of  $0.90$  for the entire scale (Rostami et al., 2016). The current study also demonstrated high internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of  $0.85$ .

### 2.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the systematic grounded theory approach, following the coding process outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2014). This process involved three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

During the open coding stage, researchers repeatedly listened to all the interviews, transcribed the text, and noted key points. The interviews were then carefully reviewed, and significant phrases relevant to the research objectives were

assigned codes. These key phrases were subsequently classified into subcategories and categories.

In the axial coding stage, data were organized to establish relationships between the categories based on their nature. The aim of this stage was to discover the connections between categories, develop a paradigmatic model, and identify the phenomenon as well as the factors, contexts, and conditions influencing marital enrichment. Researchers focused on identifying the category most frequently repeated in the data, which could link other categories together. This category, known as the central category, is pivotal within the data and is emphasized by the majority of participants as crucial for understanding the therapeutic relationship.

In the selective coding stage, the relationships between the categories within the paradigm model were explained by formulating propositions. To ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the research data, the criteria suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1994) were employed. Credibility was established through sustained engagement with the research subject and data, and by consulting with professors during the interview process and data analysis. Dependability was ensured by involving expert colleagues in the review process, where the interview transcripts were provided for a detailed examination of the coding. To achieve transferability, the study included couples from various occupational, social, and cultural backgrounds. Finally, confirmability was maintained by minimizing researcher bias, thoroughly documenting all stages of the research, and preserving all relevant data and records.

## 3. Findings and Results

The average age of the participating couples was 28.22 years. The most common level of education among participants was a Bachelor's degree, held by 11 individuals. Additionally, half of the participants were self-employed. The average duration since the marriage contract was 10 months. The subsequent sections present the analysis of the participants' interviews, including the open, axial, and selective coding processes, accompanied by relevant quotes from the participants.



**Table 1**

*Primary Codes, Subcategories, and Influential Categories in Marriage Enrichment*

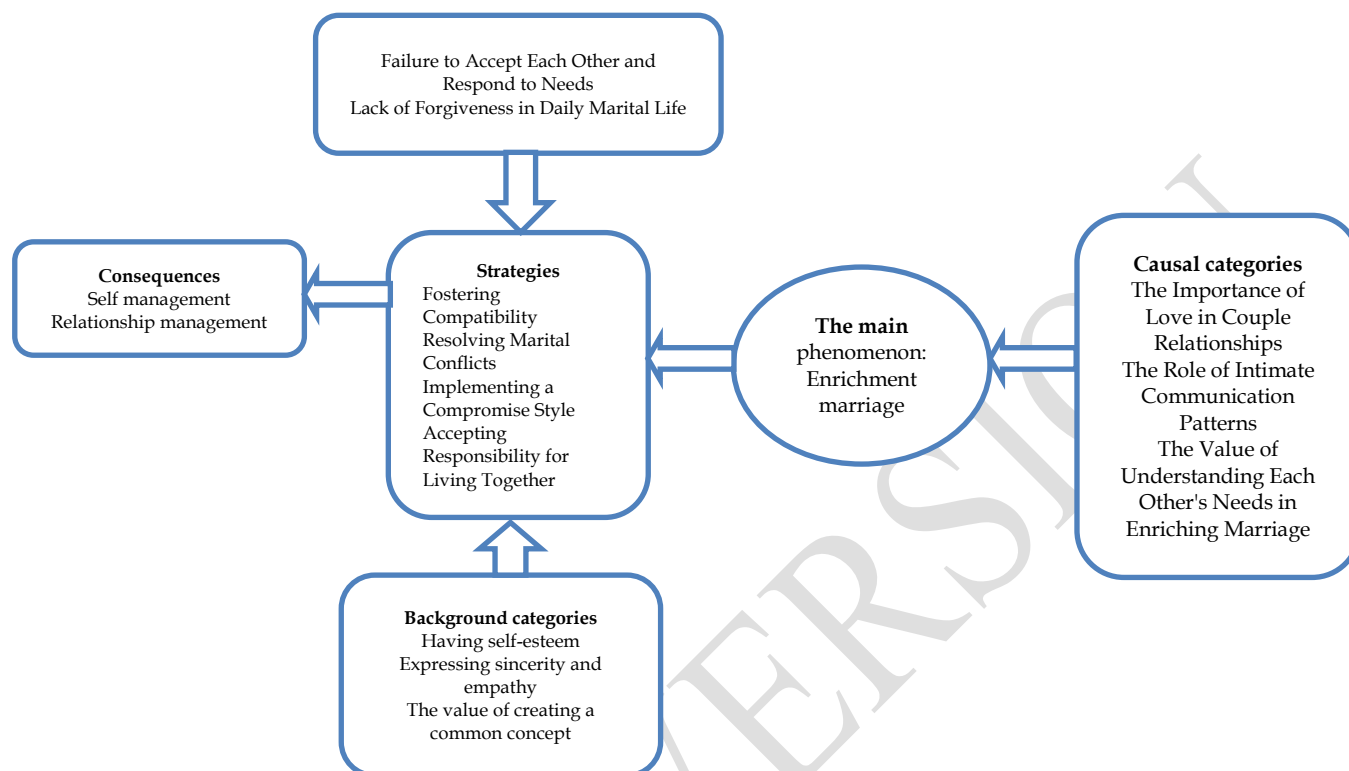
Categories	Subcategories	Primary codes
Background categories	Having self-esteem	Physical satisfaction, agreement, understanding, obtaining peace and pleasure, acceptance of change, positive perception of life, physical fitness, gratitude, independence, satisfaction of needs, life expectancy, self-confidence
	Expressing sincerity and empathy	Paying attention to each other's needs, respecting each other, validating each other's emotions, making time for each other, high tolerance, giving gifts to each other
	The value of creating a common concept	Supportiveness, acceptance of each other, acceptance of differences, acceptance of facts, not being stubborn, tolerance, not having a sense of revenge and hatred, covering each other's weaknesses, having joint activities, sharing efforts, trying to create a common memory, sharing experiences
Causal categories	The importance of love in couple relationships	Appreciation, expressing affection, thanking, desire to establish a relationship
	The role of intimate communication patterns	Effective conversation, communication with each other's family members, silence/phone mode when together, prioritizing the relationship, not judging each other, commitment, absence of dominance and violence in the family, guidance in the family, sense of shelter, sense of humor
	The value of knowing each other's needs in enriching marriage	Recognizing each other's points of view, supporting each other, affirming each other, praising each other
Strategies	Create compatibility	Patience, not controlling each other, agreement, flexible framework within the family, acceptance of limitations, planning to accomplish tasks.
	Solving marital conflicts	Trying to solve problems, agreeing on differences, discussing various issues, recognizing recurring conflicts, gender equality, strong religious beliefs, good-naturedness, avoiding stereotypes, modesty, transparency, support system
	Compromise style implementation	Avoiding unreasonable expectations, time management, forgiveness, controlling anger and aggression, taking the lead in apologizing, accepting mistakes, win-win negotiation style, avoiding teasing and humiliation, correcting each other's mistakes, decision-making skills
	Accepting responsibility for living together	Making time for each other, encouraging each other, persuasion, feeling responsible in the family, compassionate presence, helping, maintaining confidentiality
Intervening categories	Failure to accept each other and respond to needs	Creating tension over problems, not accepting negative emotions, speaking harshly, not being available, hostile conversations, neglecting the relationship
	Lack of forgiveness in daily marital life	Not controlling anger, confrontation, criticism, whining, lack of apology, pride, giving up
Consequences	Self management	Awareness of emotions, control of negative emotions, empathy, awareness of each other's mindset, consultation, consensus
	Relationship management	Conflict resolution, studying, increasing awareness, seeking counseling and therapy, increasing intimacy, creating a sense of belonging, mutual benefit

As shown in Table 1, the analysis of the interviews resulted in the identification of 105 initial codes, which were subsequently categorized into 14 subcategories and finally

grouped into 5 main categories. Following this, the paradigm model related to marital enrichment from the couples' perspective is presented.

**Figure 1**

*Model of marriage enrichment process*



### The First Main Category: Background Categories

Regarding the factors underlying the enrichment of marriage, couples highlighted codes such as having self-esteem, expressing intimacy and empathy, and the value of creating a shared understanding. Couples believed that marital enrichment does not occur suddenly or unilaterally; rather, it requires mutual efforts and foundational factors, such as high self-esteem in both partners. Below are some representative quotations:

"Because we respect each other's freedoms in our lives and accept ourselves, we have hope for the future and can work hard for our lives." (Participant 5)

"We gave each other a lot of gifts to maintain our marriage, and we respect each other." (Participant 1)

"When we treated each other with respect and communicated openly and transparently, our relationship became much better and richer." (Participant 2)

"When we approached issues realistically, accepted the facts, and even cooperated in addressing them, our relationship improved significantly." (Participant 3)

### The Second Main Category: Causal Categories

Regarding the causal factors that sustain a marital relationship, couples emphasized the importance of love, the

role of intimate communication patterns, and the value of recognizing each other's needs in enriching marriage. Couples believed that a successful marriage is not solely based on love, but also on effective communication and interaction. Below are some examples of participants' quotes:

"While we formally thank each other for our efforts, we also joke with each other." (Participant 7)

"When we loved each other and did not hesitate to express our love, our relationship became much better and richer." (Participant 6)

"When we were together, we silenced our phones and paid attention to non-verbal and visual communication, which significantly enhanced our relationship." (Participant 2)

"The more self-awareness and understanding we had of each other, the better we performed, resulting in a much better and richer relationship." (Participant 10)

### The Third Main Category: Strategies

Another key category identified is the strategies that couples use to enrich their marriage. Strategies such as fostering compatibility, resolving marital conflicts, implementing a compromise style, and accepting the

responsibility of living together are crucial for marital enrichment. Couples acknowledged that a successful marriage requires specific skills and deliberate actions. Below are some representative quotations:

"The more patient we were, the better and richer our relationship became; conversely, the hastier we were, the worse our relationship turned out." (Participant 4)

"The more we approached issues in a problem-solving manner and worked to resolve conflicts, the better and richer our relationship became." (Participant 8)

"We tried not to have unrealistic expectations of each other, and if the other person couldn't meet them, we refrained from teasing." (Participant 5)

"We both work, but we make time for a good life and help each other with our tasks." (Participant 9)

#### **The Fourth Main Category: Intervening Categories**

A series of intervening factors, such as not accepting each other, failing to respond to needs, and a lack of forgiveness, can hinder the enrichment of marriage. Participants emphasized that identifying these factors and working to control or eliminate them plays a crucial role in enhancing marital relationships. Examples of participants' quotes include:

"When we speak harshly or with a bad tone, we stray from the positive goals of our marriage." (Participant 7)

"The fact that my wife is sometimes emotionally unavailable has a significant impact on our marriage." (Participant 10)

"In marriage, it's crucial to control your anger; if you can't and instead yell and complain all the time, enrichment will not happen." (Participant 11)

"If there is pride or insult in the marital relationship, it will never become rich." (Participant 1)

#### **The Fifth Main Category: Consequences**

Finally, marital enrichment leads to self-management and relationship management. According to participants, when the necessary efforts are made to ensure a successful marriage, positive consequences emerge, making life more enjoyable for both partners. Below are some of the participants' quotes:

"These behaviors lead us to understand each other better and encourage us to continue working on maintaining enrichment." (Participant 2)

"Enrichment makes you realize that there is never a dead end in the relationship, and you can always seek help from a counselor when needed." (Participant 4)

"I was able to understand and control my emotions." (Participant 9)

"Enrichment makes you feel that you belong somewhere and to someone, and that you are not alone." (Participant 10)

## **4. Discussion and Conclusion**

This research aimed to analyze the factors affecting the enrichment of couples during the marriage stage. The analysis of interviews led to the identification of 105 open codes, which were classified into 14 subcategories and further grouped into 5 main categories. The categories and subcategories include: Background categories (having self-esteem, expressing sincerity and empathy, the value of creating a common concept), Causal categories (the importance of love in couple relationships, the role of intimate communication patterns, the value of knowing each other's needs in enriching marriage, Strategies (create compatibility solving marital conflicts, compromise style implementation, accepting responsibility for living together), Intervening categories (failure to accept each other and respond to needs, lack of forgiveness in daily marital life), Consequences (self management and relationship management).

The first identified theme was the category of underlying factors, which included core codes such as self-esteem, expressing intimacy and empathy, and creating a common concept. Self-esteem, defined as an individual's perception of their own worth, is shaped by environmental experiences and manifests in interpersonal relationships during adulthood (Martinez et al., 2021). According to attachment theory, individuals with a secure attachment style tend to exhibit higher self-confidence and self-esteem, traits that are crucial in adulthood and married life. Self-esteem refers to how individuals evaluate themselves overall; those with higher self-esteem are generally more successful in their relationships. Healthy self-esteem acts as a buffer against life's challenges, enabling individuals to navigate conflicts and negative pressures more effectively, ultimately allowing them to enjoy life more fully (Shakri, 2022). Moreover, individuals with high self-esteem are confident in their abilities, making them more resilient in the face of obstacles and better able to adapt to new situations (Fatemi Panah, 2022). Research shows that couples with high self-esteem tend to experience greater intimacy (Berger & Hannah, 1999). Intimacy, a crucial aspect of a passionate marriage, involves achieving unity and harmony between two people. It encompasses deep connections on both physical and spiritual levels, where partners feel emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually close to each other (Jin et al., 2019). In this

study, participants acknowledged that self-esteem and sincerity form the foundation for a fulfilling marriage. Additionally, the concept of creating a shared understanding, or "joint conceptual creation," was identified as a key factor in fostering a happy and lasting marriage (Moore et al., 2017). Couples who understand each other's perspectives tend to have more successful relationships, leading to greater happiness and satisfaction. Research indicates that couples who are familiar with each other's conceptual world have more positive interactions, higher self-confidence, fewer arguments, more supportive behaviors, and stronger attachment (Liu et al., 2020). Therefore, for couples to enjoy being together and feel content, it is essential to reach an agreement in various areas of life. Similar attitudes reduce interpersonal stress and facilitate understanding of differing opinions, resulting in greater satisfaction (Dobrowolska et al., 2020)—a sentiment echoed by participants in this study.

The second main theme revolved around the causal factors of marital enrichment, which included love, intimate communication patterns, and recognizing each other's needs. Love is a process that draws individuals together, serving as the foundation for selecting a life partner (Fowler, 2007). For love to remain meaningful throughout a marriage, couples must cultivate positive behaviors, such as expressing love towards each other (Xuan, 2020). An individual's definition of love shapes their expectations of a romantic relationship, which in turn influences their behavior and communication patterns (Lara & Gómez-Urrutia, 2021). The concept of a communication model provides a scientific framework for understanding the visible dynamics within a couple's relationship—how they communicate, their commitment to one another, and the time they spend together (McNallie & Gettings, 2022). According to attachment theory, secure attachment fosters confidence and healthy relationships, while anxious attachment can lead to instability and communication issues. Avoidant attachment reflects a fear of closeness and a desire to avoid intimate relationships, while disorganized attachment is associated with significant instability and conflict in emotional relationships (Bowlby, 1988). In families with sincere communication patterns, secure attachment is prevalent, and couples typically spend significant time together, prioritize each other, and are mindful of how they communicate (Graham et al., 2020). In this study, participants highlighted the importance of effective conversation, communication with each other's family members, silencing phones when together, prioritizing the relationship, avoiding judgment, maintaining commitment, preventing dominance and violence, and

fostering a sense of humor and guidance within the family. Recognizing each other's needs also plays a crucial role in enriching a marriage. The importance of understanding a spouse's needs lies in the fact that needs often significantly influence behavior and communication. By recognizing these needs, couples can predict behaviors, provide effective support during times of need, and thus avoid conflict, increase happiness, maintain intimacy, and improve interpersonal functioning. This deepens the relationship, strengthens the bond, and enhances marital satisfaction (Dobrowolska et al., 2020).

The third category involves strategies such as fostering compatibility, resolving marital conflicts, adopting a compromise style, and accepting responsibility to enrich marriage. Research indicates that marital compatibility encompasses four key components: mutual agreement, solidarity, the expression of love, and satisfaction between partners (Kendrick & Drentea, 2016).

According to attachment theory, consistent and effective communication with parents and within the family environment plays a crucial role in nurturing individuals. It fosters feelings of security and self-confidence, reduces stress and anxiety, and strengthens social relationships. Consequently, a secure attachment style develops, which facilitates adaptation and problem-solving (Bowlby, 1988). Adaptation is particularly critical during the early years of marriage, when couples are more likely to face tensions. The greater their ability to understand and forgive each other, the higher the likelihood of sustaining their relationship (Kreitler, 2018). In other words, understanding each other's differences is key to resolving conflicts.

Marital conflict is widely recognized as a significant indicator of family solidarity and a fundamental element in determining the quality of family life (Khurshid et al., 2019). Conflict resolution tactics refer to the responses or patterns of behavior that individuals employ when facing conflict. While marital conflicts are natural in various aspects of couples' lives, the methods used to resolve these conflicts are crucial. Effective conflict resolution is key to the longevity of a marriage. Couples who support each other and work towards solving problems tend to have richer lives (Tolla, 2022).

In this study, participants highlighted strategies such as striving to solve problems, agreeing on disagreements, discussing various issues, recognizing recurring conflicts, upholding gender equality, and adhering to strong religious beliefs and good manners. Additionally, they emphasized the importance of avoiding stereotypical perspectives,



practicing modesty and transparency, and utilizing a support system to enrich their marriages and resolve conflicts.

Furthermore, adopting a compromise style and accepting responsibility were identified as key strategies for enriching marriage. Responsibility is defined as the ability to regulate one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, coupled with the willingness to be accountable for one's choices and their personal and social consequences. In line with this definition, responsibility is often viewed as an internal commitment to carry out tasks optimally (Bashir & McTaggart, 2022).

In married life, responsibility leads to greater satisfaction and happiness, as both partners share the burden of tasks and roles. This balanced distribution of responsibilities reduces pressure on any one individual and enhances the quality of married life (Rogers et al., 2021). Previous research (Dong & Xiao, 2010; Khodadadi Sangdeh et al., 2015; Shirdel & Shujaei Baghini, 2015), also highlights the importance of compromise and the acceptance of responsibility in achieving a successful marriage.

The fourth category identified from participant interviews relates to intervening factors, specifically non-acceptance, lack of responsibility, and lack of forgiveness.

According to the acceptance-rejection theory, which focuses on the family environment (Rohner, 2008), the presence of acceptance—characterized by intimacy, affection, care, comfort, nurturing, and support—is crucial for enriching a marriage. Conversely, a lack of acceptance within the family can hinder progress and affect marital harmony (Unal & Akgun, 2022). Non-acceptance of a spouse, therefore, can exacerbate marital conflicts (Li & Liu, 2020). Based on attachment theory, responsiveness is an important organizing framework for understanding relationship dynamics and well-being (Bergeron et al., 2021). Responsiveness, which

includes understanding, validating, and caring for one's spouse, is essential for maintaining the richness of a relationship. When responsiveness is lacking, it can lead to problems within the relationship (Reis, 2014). Research has also shown that in failed marriages, couples often lack accountability toward each other (Raposo & Muise, 2021).

Another significant intervening factor in marital enrichment is the absence of forgiveness. Forgiveness is vital for sustaining relationships, as it allows couples to overcome conflicts and transform challenges into opportunities for intimacy, making it a crucial tool for maintaining a stable relationship (Rathgeber et al., 2019). When couples are unwilling to forgive each other's mistakes,

negative thoughts and emotions can fester, making it difficult to sustain the relationship (Novak et al., 2018).

Research also highlights the role of self-compassion, which enables individuals to understand their own and others' suffering from a broader, more elevated perspective, fostering empathy towards others (Wu et al., 2019). Empathy is a key component of emotional and interpersonal forgiveness. Empathetic couples tend to focus on their partner's experiences in an objective, non-selfish manner, which promotes forgiveness rather than revenge or avoidance. Through empathy, couples can understand each other's perspectives without prejudice, thereby rebuilding their relationship (Ma & Jiang, 2020). In the present study, participants identified several behaviors that hinder marital enrichment, including uncontrolled anger, confrontations, criticism, grumbling, failure to apologize, pride, and making empty promises.

The enrichment of marriage during the marriage stage leads to outcomes such as self-management and relationship management. Self-management can be defined as an individual's ability to manage physical, mental, and social conditions, as well as lifestyle changes (Boucher et al., 2022). For couples who effectively manage themselves and their relationships, three primary methods of control emerge: competition, solution orientation (cooperation and compromise), and non-avoidance (Liu et al., 2020). In essence, relationship management involves couples maintaining respect for each other in various situations, collaboratively solving problems, and having confidence in each other's abilities (Valente & Lourenço, 2020). Extensive research has explored the connection between relationship management and conflict resolution, highlighting the importance of planning to avoid conflict (Türk & Ceylan, 2020). In this study, participants emphasized that enriching their marriage was beneficial for both themselves and their relationship.

## 5. Limitations and Suggestions

While this research offers innovative insights based on its theoretical foundation, it also encountered certain limitations. The study was limited to couples in the marriage stage who sought counseling services in Tehran, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other

populations. Future research should consider analyzing this issue in different cultural contexts and across various stages of marriage. Additionally, educational programs for couples, along with individual and group counseling and

therapy sessions, should be incorporated into efforts to enhance the richness and meaning of life for couples in the marriage stage.

Another limitation was the work-related pressures experienced by participants, which occasionally led to decreased motivation to cooperate. Future research could explore categories such as couples' motivation during the marriage stage. Moreover, the nature of marriage enrichment is dynamic and non-linear. Therefore, future studies could evaluate marriage enrichment from a non-linear perspective across different periods rather than relying on a linear approach.

Finally, researchers could develop questionnaires to measure the level of marriage enrichment, expanding the scope of research in this area.

### Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article

### Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

### Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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### Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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### Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. The present research is a doctoral dissertation in counseling from the University of Tehran - Aras Campus. This research has been

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