ISSN: 2717-3216 *Volume 12, Issue 1 (2025)* https://www.ijfpjournal.ir/

Iranian Journal of Family Psychology

Research Paper

https://doi.org/10.22034/ijfp.2025.2071362.1437

From Blood Ties to Emotional Rupture: Discovering Factors Affecting Marital Dissatisfaction in Consanguineous Marriages

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Article Info.

Received: 15 March 2025

Revised: 10 May 2025

Accepted: 18 June 2025

Keywords:

Marital dissatisfaction,

Consanguineous marriage,

Couples,

Thematic analysis

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Abstract

Abstract

Consanguineous marriages, as one of the common patterns in some cultures, are associated with various social and psychological consequences. This study aimed to discover the factors affecting marital dissatisfaction in consanguineous marriages. The present research method was qualitative and data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews. The participants included all consanguineous couples who had been referred to psychological and counseling service centers in Isfahan in 2025 due to marital problems. The sampling method was purposive and after interviewing 10 couples, the data reached saturation. Data analysis was performed using Attride-Stirling's (2001) thematic analysis ; the themes were categorized into three basic, organizing, and comprehensive categories. Based on the results of the study, basic themes including 102 concepts, organizing themes including 17 concepts, and overarching themes in 6 concepts were identified and extracted under the headings of individual factors, kinship family structure, cultural factors, lack of sexual and emotional intimacy, intergenerational repetition of traumatic family patterns, and lack of cognitive experience outside the family. Identifying factors affecting marital dissatisfaction in consanguineous marriages can help reduce conflicts, promote marital satisfaction, and strengthen counseling interventions appropriate to the characteristics of consanguineous marriages.

How to Cite:
Eftekhari, M., Nejatifar, S. (2025). From Blood Ties to Emotional Rupture: Discovering Factors Affecting Marital Dissatisfaction in Consanguineous Marriages. *Journal of Family Psychology. 12*(1), 177-195.

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Introduction

One of the most common types of marriage in many traditional societies, especially in the Middle East, South Asia, and North Africa, is consanguineous marriage (i.e., a marriage between two individuals who are closely related by blood (e.g., cousins or other close relatives; Popescu et al., 2025). Most studies on consanguineous marriages have focused on the genetic and medical aspects of these types of marriages (Saleem et al., 2025), and research results have shown that consanguineous marriages can be associated with an increased risk of genetic diseases, birth defects, recurrent miscarriage, and infertility (Jameel et al., 2024). However, the psychological, social, and marital dimensions of this type of marriage, especially in the context of marital satisfaction or dissatisfaction, have received less scientific and systematic attention (Akhtar & Alyana, 2023.(

Marital dissatisfaction is a multidimensional concept that refers to a negative subjective experience and feeling of dissatisfaction with the marriage. This feeling can manifest in emotional, relational, sexual, economic, or family role areas. It can lead to consequences such as decreased intimacy, frequent conflicts, feelings of worthlessness, and ultimately emotional or legal divorce (Kim & Kwon, 2024). In consanguineous marriages, although previous ties between families, relative recognition, and cultural compatibility may initially help reduce the tensions regarding selecting the spouse, these types of marriage carry specific structural complexities that reinforce marital dissatisfaction (Ebid et al., 2021). Despite having a historical and cultural basis, consanguineous marriages in many traditional societies, including Iran, are associated with multiple consequences in biological, social, and psychological dimensions. The necessity of conducting this research study is due, on the one hand, to the existing scientific gaps in the field of comprehensive and interdisciplinary examination of the quality of marital relationships in consanguineous marriages, and, on the other hand, to the urgent need to design preventive and corrective interventions at the family and community levels. Therefore, the present study attempts to discover and explain the factors affecting marital dissatisfaction in consanguineous marriages with a comprehensive and analytical perspective.

Methodology

In this study, a qualitative approach and thematic analysis were used to discover the factors affecting marital dissatisfaction in consanguineous marriages. The statistical population included all consanguineous couples who had been referred to psychological and counseling service centers in Isfahan in 2025 due to marital problems. Purposive sampling was used to select the sample, and data saturation was achieved with 10 couples. The inclusion criteria were consanguineous marriage (close relatives), referral to psychological service centers due to marital problems, at least two years of marriage, and written consent to participate in the project. The exclusion criteria included inability to provide appropriate answers and unwillingness to cooperate. A researcher-made semi-structured interview was used to collect data. To analyze and interpret the interview data, Attride-Stirling's (2001) thematic analysis method was used, which classifies themes into three levels: basic, organizing, and global. Data validation was performed to ensure accuracy, robustness, and acceptability of the codes using Guba and Lincoln's (1982) four criteria (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability).

Findings

The analysis of the interviews showed that the phenomenon of marital dissatisfaction in consanguineous marriages occurs at three interconnected levels: individual-psychological (internal factors including lack of personal communication skills and lack of sexual-emotional intimacy), interpersonal-familial (intertwined structure of consanguineous families and intergenerational repetition of ineffective communication patterns on couples' interactions), and macro-cultural (cultural pressures to maintain loyalty to the kinship network and cognitive limitations resulting from lived in-group experience). These three levels, in dynamic interaction, create a unique ecosystem of marital challenges in consanguineous marriages.

Table 1. *Final results of thematic analysis*

Global theme	Organizing themes	Basic themes
Individual level	Psychological and emotional immaturity of couples	Inability to manage emotions Overreaction to disagreements Need for parental approval in marital decisions
	Early marriage and the lack of formation of personal identity	Fantasy or childish idea of marital life Lack of work experience and education before marriage Confusion about one's role in life
	Extreme dependence on paternal/maternal family	Obedience to parents' views regarding the spouse-related issues Transferring private life issues to parents Consulting with family constantly, even on personal issues
	Deficiency in communication skills	Emotional self-censorship due to family shame Silence in the face of a problem instead of dialogue
	Unrealistic expectations of the spouse	Expecting complete obedience and acceptance of traditional roles Comparison with others or a mental image of the ideal one Expecting the spouse to be perfect in all areas
Interpersonal-familial level	Excessive interference from both parties' families	Forcing the couple to make a certain choice Ignoring the couple's independence Familial support for their child in disputes
	Frequent and forced visits	Constant presence of family in the couple's home without coordination Pressure to attend all ceremonies and occasions Fear of being blamed if absent from family parties
	Lack of privacy for the couple	Living in the parents' house Lack of freedom in independent planning, such as parties, travel, and rest
	Lack of boundaries in raising children	Frequent comments about the child's upbringing and education Excessive role-playing (aunt instead of parent) Dichotomy between parental and family statements Attempt to instill specific family values
	Pressure to marry due to tradition	Hidden or overt coercion from the family Prioritizing the preservation of family tradition Concern about losing properties in the family
Cultural level	Divorce as a taboo in the family	Perception of divorce as a disgrace to the individual and family Pressure to endure rather than separate Perception of divorce as an irresponsibility Lack of emotional and social support after divorce
Lack of sexual and emotional intimacy	Lack of sexual attraction	Perception of spouse as an old playmate and cousin Lack of physical attraction to the spouse Comparing one's spouse to others in terms of attractiveness Blurring of kinship and sexual boundaries
	Mechanical or non-consensual sex	Having sex only to satisfy the spouse's needs Ignoring the cycle of arousal and the partner's sexual needs The feeling of lust in sex Lack of excitement in the relationship due to the previous acquaintance
	Inability to express sexual needs	The perception that talking about sex is inappropriate Silence in the face of displeasure out of decency or modesty Self-censorship to avoid argument or anger
Intergenerational repetition of traumatic family patterns	Transmission of defective marital patterns from the previous generation	Modeling emotional coldness and indifference from parents Lack of training in conversational skills and emotional expression in the last generation
Lack of cognitive experience outside the family	Limited family acquaintance choices	Accepting family choices without complete consent Superficial and limited acquaintance with the future spouse Lack of opportunity for in-depth meetings and discussions before marriage
	Overreliance on family acquaintance	Simplification in understanding personality and individual differences Ignoring the real examination of understanding, values, and lifestyle Obstructing the stages of serious premarital conversation due to family acquaintance Hasty decision-making due to long family acquaintance

Conclusion

The present study was conducted to discover the factors affecting marital dissatisfaction in consanguineous marriages. In Iranian culture, consanguineous marriages have continued for legitimate reasons and cultural logic, such as maintaining family ties. However, the findings of this study show that in the face of social changes and lifestyle changes, these unique characteristics become a harm-causing factor. The key point is the vicious cycle pattern that governs this type of marriage: the structure of the consanguineous family transmits harmful communication patterns between generations (intergenerational repetition); these patterns lead to sexual and emotional dissatisfaction, and then the culture that governs the kinship network prevents exiting from this cycle by creating forced loyalty. Therefore, marital dissatisfaction in this context is not only the result of a set of problems but also the result of an interconnected system in which each factor reinforces the other factors. This systematic explanation could explain why, despite obvious problems, many of these marriages continue formally; the pressure of the system (the kinship network) is so strong that even in the presence of deep dissatisfaction, the dissolution of the relationship entails high psychosocial costs.

Conducting longitudinal studies to examine the long-term impact of the identified factors on the continuation or collapse of marital relationships, focusing on gender differences to shed more light on the hidden dimensions of marital dissatisfaction, and using mixed methods to measure the intensity and frequency of the discovered factors are among the suggestions for further research. Designing and implementing premarital educational programs specifically for families that prefer consanguineous marriages, and developing public awareness programs at the university and media levels about the positive and negative consequences of consanguineous marriages are among the practical implications of the study.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest has been declared by the authors.

Acknowledgements

The researchers thank all participants for participating in the research study.

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