International Journal of Physical and Social Sciences
(ISSN: 2249-5894)

CONTENTS

Sr. No.	TITLE & NAME OF THE AUTHOR (S)	Page No.
1	**Factors Influencing Marital Satisfaction among Postgraduate Students.** HasleeSharil Abdullah, Lau Poh Li and Pauline Ng Ai Ai	1-19
2	**Sustainability of Rural Water Supply Schemes In Oke-Ogun of Oyo State, NIGERIA.** Toyobo Adigun Emmanuel, Tanimowo N. Bolanle and Muili A .B	20-36
3	**Happiness Quotient of Upper Secondary School Students.** HasleeSharil Abdullah, Poh Li, Lau and Sing Yee, Ong	37-57
4	**Job Involvement among White Collar Employees.** Dr. Mu. Subrahmanian	58-74
5	**Socio-Economic Conditions of Agriculture Labourers In Punjab (Ground Reality of Unemployment).** Parshotam D. Aggarwal	75-87
6	**Family Management.** K. Prabakar	88-98
7	**FDI In Emerging Markets.** Dr. Ratna Vadra	99-117
8	**Hospitality And Tourism Industry.** Robil Sahni and Esha Mehta	118-142
9	**A New Proposal for Voltage Regulation Multi Feeders/ Multibus Systems Using MC-DVR.** Vasudevanaidu and Dr. Basavaraja	143-168
10	**Inclusive Growth: Vision And Challenges of An Emerging Economy –A case Study Of India.** Dr. Snigdha Tripathy	169-195
11	**Social Sector Revamp – A Need for Economic Growth.** Dr. Vijay Kumar Mishra	196-207
12	**Impact of Social Networking Sites on E-Commerce Business.** Preeti Dhankar	208-222
13	**Ansoff's strategic paradigm for MFIs sustainability in inclusive growth.** Asha Antony .P	223-236
14	**World Trade in Services: An Overview.** Minu Singal	237-264
15	**The Effects Of Joining To WTO on Non-Oil Export Of Iran.** Seyed Mohammad Hossein Sadr and Mahdi Ahrari	265-285

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Title

FACTORS INFLUENCING MARITAL SATISFACTION AMONG POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract:

This study evaluated marital satisfaction among the postgraduate students in a public university in Malaysia. It also explored the factors influencing marital satisfaction. The sample consisted of 132 married students. The instrument used in this research was ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale. Results of the study indicated that gender, race, teachers and non teachers, single and dual income earners, age, age difference between spouse, number of children, length of marriage and household income did not show significant impact on marital satisfaction. Equalitarian roles, conflict resolution, leisure activities, sexual relationship and religious orientation were found to play a significant role in influencing marital satisfaction with the r value of above .50. The other factors; personality, communication, financial management, children and parenting and family and friends were also found to be significant but the r value is below .50.

Keyword: marital satisfaction, marriage, family, counselling, relationship, spouse.

Introduction:

Since independence in 1957, Malaysia has been enjoying rapid economic growth and social economic transformation. Malaysia society too has changed a lot over the past few decades. Thoughout the post-independence period, rapid urbanization, economic development and modernization have caused a significant impact on family life. This has also resulted in changes in Malaysia social cultural pattern leading to a more fragmented family structure. Marriage, the basic building blocks of a society was traditionally reverently held. However, time seemed to have changed the trends. According to the Ministry of Women and Family Development Malaysia, the number of divorce cases had gone up from 1613 (non-Muslim) and 13536 (Muslim) in year 2000 to 5747 (non-Muslim) and 21419 (Muslim) in year 2006. The average of divorce cases based on the statistics reaches up to 20% per year and this harch reality of marital dissolution indicates the instability of Malaysian family structure.

Marriage is considered one of the most important human relationships by most if not, all levels of society in the world. It is also described as the fundamental family structure and basic building block of a society. In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the necessity for love and belonging

occupies a central domain in second level. Marriage can satisfy this demand for love and belonging in a variety of ways. Rosen-Granden (2004) summarizes marital satisfaction as the degree to which an individual's needs, expectations, and desires are being satisfied in their marriage, a subjective condition which can only be described by the individual spouse and an individual's personal evaluation of their marriage overall.

Since research in marriage started to be conducted in 1930s, the most frequently studied aspect in research and family relationships is that of satisfaction, or what helps people maintain happiness in their marriages (Heymain, Sayers, & Bellack, 1994; Spanier, 1976) (as cited in Myers, Madathil & Tingle, 2005). Researchers are intrigued with characteristics of marital satisfaction and strive to investigate the influences of various different antecedents on marital satisfaction. Marital researchers have, for along time, been interested to investigate factors contributing to marital satisfaction. In recent years, there has been a subtantial body of literature focusing on factors related to a satisfying and happy marriage (Fincham & Bradbury, 1990; Vangelisti & Huston, 1994). McCabe (2006) makes clear relationship satisfaction is determined by a myriad of factors and that are the relative importance of these factors likely varies among couples.

The hope for a happy fulfilling mariage is one of our deepest desires. Sharing our hopes, dreams and life with the one we love is one's life's most fulfilling experience. The fulfillment of marital needs and satisfaction form the pillar of strength for the marriage as well as acts as a predictors of a successful and happy union. Hence, it is essential to provide mutual satisfaction of the couple's needs without compromising the emotional environment nccessary for further growth and development of two maturing, changing individuals.

On the other hand, if the spouse is unable to attain satisfaction of his/her expectations and needs of marital bliss or the marriage falls short of his/her perception of conjugal bliss, this may lead to the collapse of the marriage structure. As a result, it would definitely be detrimental to the family, children and even society. Thus, this study attempted to investigate the various variables of marital satisfaction among the postgraduate students of a public university and to shed light on factors which sustains a good marriage. This quantitative research primarily focused on the level of marital satisfaction and the factors which may attribute to the growth of a healthy and happy marriage.

Research Questions:

Based on the issues highlighted above, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What is the marital satisfaction level of postgraduate students in a public university?
2. Are there any differences in marital satisfaction mean of postgraduate students in a public university among: a)gender b)race c)teachers and non teachers d)single and dual income?
3. Isthere any relationship between marital satisfaction score of postgraduate students in a public university and:a)age b)age difference between spouse c)number of children d)length of marriage e)household income?
4. What is the nature of relationship between marital satisfaction score with: a)personality b)communication c)conflict resolution d)financial concerns e)sexual relationship f)children and parenting g)family and friends h)equalitarian roles i)religious orientation j)leisure activities?

Methodology:

In order to investigate the level of marital satisfaction and the factors which influence a good marriage, a survey research design was employed to gather the necessary data and to answer the research questions formulated.

Sample:

The sample consisted of 132 respondents included 44 male and 88 female postgraduate students from a public university in Malaysia. The participants were selected based on a purposive random sampling. Both male and female participants were married and aged between 28 years and 60 years. The participants were predominantly teachers and were pursuing their postgraduate studies on either full time or part time basis.

Data Collection:

Volunteer respondents were recuited through verbal communication. Data were collected from participants in the foyers, classrooms and canteen.

Instruments:

Marital satisfaction was measured with the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS). The EMS scale provides a global measure of satisfaction by surveying 10 factors of the couple's marriage. These factors include the major categories in ENRICH: personality, equalitarian roles, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, leisure activities, sexual relationship, children and parenting, family and friends, and religion orientation. The EMS has an internal validity reliability of .86 and reliability co-effecient over time of .86. Concurrent validity for the scale has correlation of .71 for men and .77 for women with single item measures. The construct validity found for the EMS scale has correlation of.71 for couple scores and .66 for individual scores. A pilot study was carried out on 20 postgraduate students to evaluate the EMS scale for internal validity. Cronbach's alpha revealed a strong internal reliability of .87.

Data Analysis:

For descriptive analysis, means, frequency distribution, standard deviations and percentile were provided to answer research question 1. To assess whether there is any significant difference in EMS score mean and four independent variables, One Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and T-tests were used. Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was used to examine the relationship between marital satisfaction score and ten influencing factors assessed in this study.

Results:

The marital satisfaction level of postgraduate students in a public university

The ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) Score was categorized into three levels; low, average and high to answer Research Question 1.

Table

Distribution of ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) Score according to Level

	Ferequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Low	18	13.6	13.6	13.6
Average	107	81.1	81.1	94.7
High	7	5.3	5.3	100.0
Total	132	100.0	100.0	

Out of 132 respondents, 107 respondents (81.1%) experienced an average level of marital satisfaction while 18 respondents (13.6) reported low satisfaction in their married life. Only 7 respondents (5.3%) demonstrated a high level of marital satisfaction.

The Differences in marital satisfaction mean of postgraduate students in a public university based on: a)gender b)race c)teachers and non teachers d)single and dual income?

A) <u>Gender (Male and Female)</u>

Means, standard deviations, t-value and significance of mean differences of ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) score and gender are shown in table below.

Table

Means, Standard Deviations and Significant of Mean Difference of ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) score and Gender

Gender	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	Sig(2 tailed)
Male (n=44)	49.64	12.31	1.57	.12
Female (n= 88)	45.73	14.05		

T-test was conducted to examine the significant of mean differences of ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) score and gender. No significant difference was found between the male and female, t (130) = 1.57, p > .05.

B) Race (Malay, Chinese, Indian and Others)

A one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to identify significant mean differences among the four races in Malaysia on marital satisfaction.

Table

Means, Standard Deviations and Signifcant of Mean Difference of ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) score and Gender

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	824.07	3	274.69	1.51	.22
Within Groups	23319.81	128	182.19		
Total	24143.88	133			

No signifcant differences among the four groups for marital satisfaction [F (3, 128) = .22, p > .05] was found. There were however, numerical differences in the groups. Chinese respondents had the highest mean of 50.68 (SD = 8.56). The Malay respondents had a mean of 42.24 (SD = 14.85), followed by the Indian respondents with a mean of 44.00 (SD = 13.68). "Others" respondents recorded the lowest mean of 39.00 (SD = 5.66) among the groups.

C) Teacher and Non teacher

Means, standard deviations and significance of differences of ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) score and Teacher/ Non teacher.

Table

Means, Standard Deviations and Signifcant of Mean Difference of ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) score and Teacher/Non teacher

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	Sig(2 tailed)
Teacher (n=89)	47.21	14.10	.22	.82
Non teacher(n= 43)	46.65	12.58		

T-test was conducted to examine the significant of mean differences of ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) score and teachers/non teachers. No significant difference was found between the teacher and non-teacher, t (130) = .22, p > .05.

D) Singleand Dual income

Means, standard deviations and significance of differences of ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) score and Single/Dual income.

Table

Means, Standard Deviations and Significant of Mean Difference of ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) score and Single/Dual income

Income	Mean	Standard Deviation	t	Sig(2 tailed)
Single (n=15)	47.07	13.89	.01	.99
Dual(n= 117)	47.03	13.60		

T-test was conducted to examine the significant of mean differences of ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) score and teachers/non teachers. No significant difference was found between single income and dual income, t (130) = .01, p > .05.

The Relationship between Marital Satisfaction score of Postgraduate Students in a public university and: a)age b)age difference between spouse c)number of children d)length of marriage e)household income

The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients of ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) score with other variables (age, age difference between spouse, number of children, length of marriage and household income).

Table

Means, Standard Deviations and Correlation of Independent Variables with ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS) Score

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Correlation (r)
Age	38.28	6.54	.00*

Age difference of spouse	2.64	2.51	-.01*
Length of marriage	11.66	6.88	.04*
Number of children	2.39	1.84	.13*
Monthly household income	RM6984.09	RM3481.26	-.05*

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (1-tailed)

In general, most of the study variables demonstrated very weak correlation with EMS score satisfaction except for age which did not show any correlation. Varaibles such as age difference between spouse and monthly household income were negatively significantly related to EMS score, r (133) = -.01 and r (133) = -.05, $p < .05$. These results indicated that the lower the age differences between spouse and the lesser the children, the higher marital satisfaction. The analyses also revealed that leghth of marriage had a weak but positive correlation with EMS score, r(133) = .04, $p < .05$.

The Relationship between Marital Satisfaction score with: a)Personality b)Communication c)Conflict resolution d)Financial concerns e)Sexual relationship f)Children and parenting g)Family and friends h)Equalitarians roles i)Religious orientation j)Leisure activities

The pearson product-moment correlation co-efficients between ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS) score andfactors of Marital Satisfaction varied across scales as showed in table below.

Table

Means, Standard Deviations and Correlation of Independent Variables with ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS) Score

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Correlation (r)
Personality	3.58	1.13	.13*
Equalitarion Roles	4.27	.83	.76**
Communication	3.81	1.16	.25**
Conflict Resolution	4.11	.80	.75**

Financial Management	3.66	1.20	.07*
Leisure Activities	4.02	.95	.74**
Sexual Relationship	4.07	.91	.73**
Children and Parenting	3.74	1.12	.23**
Family and Friends	3.79	1.13	.12*
Religious Orientation	4.35	.89	.62**

*Correlation is significant at the .05 level (1-tailed)

** Correlation is significant at the level .01 level (1-tailed)

Of these, Equalitarian Roles had the strongest positive correlation with EMS score, r (130) = .76, p < .01. Conflict Resolution demonstrated a strong positive correlation with EMS score, r(130) = .75, p < .01. The findings also indicated that couples who spent more time in leisure activities and had better sexual relationship enjoyed higher satisfaction in their marriage, r (130) = .74 and r (130) = .73, p < .01 respectively. Religious Orientation, Communication and Children and Parenting were significantly and positively related to EMS score, r (130) = .62, r (130) = .25 and r (130) = .23, p <.01 respectively. Additionally, the results also showed that Personality, Family and Friends and Financial Management demonstrated a weaker signifcant yet positive relationship to marital satisfaction, r (130) = .13, r (130) = .12 and r (130) = .08, p < .05 respectively.

Discussion:

The demographic variables included in this study such as gender, race and occupation (teacher and non teacher) suggested none or very marginal significant differences in the level of marital satisfaction. Past research investigating gender differences and marital satisfaction had produced conflicting results. Besides, the lack of differences between marital satisfaction of postgraduates from diverse races in this the study could be explained by the fact that although Malaysian

population was cultural diverse, they shared common Asian marital values and cultures. In general, marital satisfaction was not affected by occupation but rather by other factors such as job satisfaction and income.

Analytically, teachers and non teachers did not have much difference in the level of marital satisfaction. The spike in the high number of teachers with high levels of marital satisfaction compared to non teachers may be due to teachers having more stability in areas such as financial and daily activities and also to the nature of the occupation, unlike non teachers who may be experiencing fluctuations in those aspects.It appeared that the younger participant, the higher the marital satisfaction. That may be attributed to the fact that younger respondents were less culturally and traditions bound in marriage as compared to their older counterparts. At the same time, they may be more open in their thinking and practice open communication which helps to enhance satisfaction in married life.

Analysis of the findings showed that length of marriage has a slightly positive correlation with EMS score. A possible explanation to this situation is that a couple married for a long time has already established a certain level of understanding between themselve leading to greater tolerance and harmony in their marriage.

The next finding showed that respondents who have more children reported higher level of marital satisfaction as compared to those with fewer children. In the Asian society, the birth of a child is to strengthen the bond between husband and wife which leads to higher levels of marital satisfaction.

Interestingly, participants with higher monthly income reported lower levels of marital satisfaction as compared to those who have lower monthly income. These findings can be justified by the probability that respondents with higher household income have larger workload and responsibilities at workplace. Therefore, these couples may face a higher demand in fulfilling their work expectations in areas such as time and efforts.

Among the ten factors analyzed in this study, equalitarian roles, conflict resolution, leisure activities, sexual relationship and religious orientation were found to have a strong correlation with the EMS score. In constrast, personality, communication, financial management and family and friends demonstrated a weak correlation with the EMS score. The correlation of Equalitarian Roles with marital satisfaction was found to be strongest among the study variable, r

(130) = .76, p < .01. According to the findings, participants who were satisfied with their family/marital roles and expectations had a higher level of marital satisfaction. However, the Equalitarian Roles item in the EMS scale merely provides information related to the satisfaction attained in that particular role rather than the roles the respondents prefer. Hence, futher research can be carried out to identify whether the participants' level of marital satisfaction is due to traditional or egalitarian role patterns. Couples who had good conflict resolution in their marriage are able to predict the possibility of potential arguments and disputes that may occur.

The adage "The family that plays together stays together" underlay the findings of this study. Participants who were happy and satisfied with the leisure activities and time spent together enjoy greater marital satisfaction. Sexual relationship increases intimacy and strengthens the emotional and spiritual bond in couple. Couples who feel satisfied with the way they each practice their religious beliefs and values reported higher levels of marital satisfaction. In general, a person's religious orientation influences his/her life in many aspects including principles, moral values, acceptable behaviour and upbringing of children. Hence, similarly religious oriented couples are more likely to have common goals, values and aspirations which lead to quality enhancement of their marital life.

According to the findings, Financial management had the loweset correlation with the EMS score. This may due to the fact that respondents in this study mostly came from middle to upper family with an average income of RM7000. However, it is very interesting to note that in this study, communication and personality did not have a strong correlation with marital satisfaction as expected. Most literature found that good communication was vital in predicting marital harmony and satisfaction (Gee, Scott, Castellani & Cordova, 2002; Gottman, Coan, Carrere, Swanson, 1998). One of the possible explanations for these results may be attributed to the Asian culture. A typical Asian family can be considered to be conservative and traditional in its family values. Therefore, members of the family tend to be more inhibited while expressing themselves as this is perceived as an act of mutual respect and understanding. The Asian language employs communication patterns that promote harmonious social interactions. Individual are encourage to use indirect communication styles which involve non verbal cues and reluctance to confront and contradict openly. Besides, the Asian culture places high emphasis on the marriage institution. Couples who plan to tie the knot are expected to be

mentally, physically and emotional prepared to commit themselves to each other. Hence, Asian individuals have usually overcome the personality barrier before venturing into the marriage stage. External factors such as Family and Friends are also found to have less effect on the marital satisfaction. Friends and family may have the role of being the pillar of support to married couples but they actually do not carry much weight in determining the quality of the couple's marriage.Findings showed that there was marginally positive correlation between Children and Parenting with EMS score. This finding was consistent with research by Kurdek (1995), implying the positive influence of children on marital satisfaction.

Counseling Implication:

It is very important for a counselor to understand the underlying dynamics in a marriage. When a couple experiences frustrations and unhappiness in their marriage, they are often too distraught and confused to identity the source of their unhappiness. It is then the responsibility of the counselor to help the couple to ascertain their own feelings about the marriage. Therefore, this research suggests that counselors may benefit from understanding the various variables impacting marital satisfaction. Armed with this knowledge, the counselor may help the couple to develop insight about their role and expectations in a marriage. The couple may be then encouraged to examine their interactional styles and learn to communicate each other needs in an effective manner for increased marital satisfaction.

Conclusion:

As a whole, this study investigated the relationship of various variables with marital satisfaction. The differences in independent variables such as gender, race, teachers and non-teachers, and single and dual income earners do not show much significant impact on the level of marital satisfaction. It is found that factors that are the equalitarian roles, conflict resolution, leisure activities, sexual relationship and religious orientation play an essential role in marital satisfaction as compared to other factors that are personality, communication, financial management, children and parenting and family and friends. However, the study is still subjected to futher enquiry and research due to its small sample size and location.

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