

## **PERCEIVED RELATIONAL FACTORS IN MARITAL STABILITY AMONG MARRIED AND DIVORCED BOSNIANS: DO WE UNDERSTAND ONE ANOTHER?**

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### **Abstract**

With an increase in divorce rates worldwide, it seems that marriage loses its importance and popularity. Still, many people seek romantic partners and marry for many reasons. Research points to the beneficial effects of marital and romantic relationships. What factors make a good and successful marital and romantic relationship and why marriages and relationships fall apart remains to be answered. Since the divorce rates in Bosnia and Herzegovina increase, the purpose of this study was to explore factors in good and successful marriages and reasons for divorce. This is a qualitative study in which a survey with open-ended questions was used to explore participants' responses. With the help of convenience sampling technique, 366 participants, N= 167 married and N=199 divorced with a mean age  $M= 43\pm 11$  and  $M= 41\pm 10$  respectively were recruited. A content analysis of participants' responses shows that both a good and successful marriage and reasons for divorce are mostly related to relational interpersonal and intrapersonal factors while external, social factors play a less important role. Married and divorced participants named understanding, love, respect, trust, tolerance, communication skills, agreement and compromise as the top qualities for a successful marriage. As the leading reasons for divorce, divorced participants listed adultery or affairs and other women, alcoholism, violence and aggression, arguments and conflict, and misunderstanding.

**Keywords:** good and successful marriage, reasons for divorce, relational factors, Bosnia and Herzegovina

## Introduction

Many individuals seek romantic relationship and a marriage. These usually start as a source of satisfaction and fulfillment. Research shows that psychological adjustment and physical health is better among married adults compared to separated, divorced, and never married individuals (Horn et al., 2013). Furthermore, healthy, stable and quality relationships are positively correlated with general wellbeing (Kansky, 2018; Robertson et al., 2018). It also seems that highly satisfying marriages may offer spouses opportunities to feel that they belong and that they are connected to others. Belonging and connection are important basic human needs (Baumeister and Leary, 1995, Ryan & Deci, 2000) which are successfully met in satisfying marriages and relationships. Healthy and quality relationships and marriages are positively correlated with happiness, wellbeing and life satisfaction (Lee & Ono, 2012; Luhmann et al., 2012) as well as social support. A large body of research suggests that social support is beneficial for both physical health and subjective wellbeing (Cohen, 2004; Siedlecki et al., 2014). However, what seems to be positively correlated with wellbeing and health and starting off with plenty of love, affection, satisfaction, and fulfillment nevertheless frequently dissolves, resulting in significant individual and societal strains. The current high divorce and separation rates attract attention of researchers of different orientations studying marital and romantic relationships. Contrary to previous practices, individual interests take precedence over the interests, customs and expectations of the wider community in the current trends in romantic and marital relationships. Whilst sociologists focus on macro-behavioral forms of marital interaction, such as division of responsibilities and friendship, psychologists focus on micro-behavioral forms, trying to understand the interpersonal forms that lead to good and successful or quality and stable marriages or, respectively, dissolution, separation, distress or even divorce. Divorce is, in many cases, the culmination of a long process of spousal emotional distancing and growing individual independence. Divorce ranks high on the list of major

life stressors which often leads to psychological problems, consistent with studies in psychiatric epidemiology which report a relatively high rate of depression, depressive symptoms, and other psychological problems in separated divorced individuals in many epidemiological samples (Faye et al., 2013; McShall & Johnson, 2015; Slavich, 2016).

Even more, parental divorce is linked to psychopathology and behavioral problems in their offspring generations later (Jackson, Rogers & Sartor, 2016; Nederhof et al., 2012; Vousura et al., 2012). This proliferation of evidence suggests that divorce may contribute psychopathological risk in both spouses and their offspring. Scientists, researchers, and even therapists raise their concern related to marital stability and divorce rates which seem to increase (Draganovic, 2020). Likewise, the number of divorces in Bosnia and Herzegovina has increased for the past five years (Federalni zavod statistiku, as cited by Draganovic, 2020).

Studies until now indicate different intra-personal and interpersonal or relational factors associated with marital stability and instability or divorce range personality factors (Boertien & Mortelmans, 2018; Lee & Martin, 2019) and attachment factors (Diamond, Brimhall & Elliot, 2018) to individualization (Strandell, 2018), relationship factors (Finkel, 2018; Gottman, 2015) couples' communication and interaction factors (Afrasiabi & Jafarizadeh, 2015; Mohlatlole, Sithole & Shirindi, 2018; Zaheri et al., 2016), spousal similarities in health behaviors, gene expression, immune profiles and the gut (Kiecolt-Glaser, 2018), social media, (McDaniel, Drouin & Cravens, 2017) and the minding model of love (Boniwell, 2012). Even though love seems to be the number one factor in marriage (Boniwell, 2012), college students are ambivalent about love as necessary to maintain marriage (Sprecher & Hatfield, 2017), while young couples highly associate sudden character change, lack of and poor communication, financial problems, abuse and infidelity (Mohlatlole, Sithole & Shirindi, 2018) and infidelity related behaviors on social media (McDaniel, Drouin & Cravens,

2017) with divorce. To the best of our knowledge, there are no studies on intrapersonal or relational factors in marriage or reasons for divorce in Bosnia and Herzegovina so far, despite high divorce rates. In the light of the above discussion and highlighting psychological benefits of quality marriage and detrimental effects of divorce, we explore how Bosnian married people perceive good marital relationships and the reasons which prompted divorced individuals to dissolve their marriages.

## Method

A qualitative research method in the form of a survey was used in this study. The survey contained a socio-demographic questionnaire followed by two open-ended questions (1. “*In your opinion what makes a good/successful marriage*”, posed to both married and divorced participants, and, 2. “*What is the reason for your divorce*”, posed to divorced participants only), which were posed in order to explore participants’ experiences. This was followed by an encouragement note to participants to express their opinion and response whilst their privacy is protected. Inclusion criteria for the study were: a) married or divorced and b) possession of competence necessary to give consent to participate in the study. Participation was voluntary and no material compensation was offered. The survey was distributed following the snow ball principle and data collection took part over several months.

Open-ended questions do not provide participants with a predetermined set of answer choices but allow participants to provide answers in their own words. This method allows researchers to gain a capacious look at the issue studied. In this particular case, I was interested in participants’ responses regarding their perception of good or successful marriage and reasons for divorce. Content analysis was used to analyze gathered data which was then coded into qualities/reasons which were then further quantified and ranked according to their order and occurrence in both groups (as presented in tables 2 and 3).

## Sampling and sample

The convenience snow ball sampling method was used to recruit participants for this study which consists of two groups of participants, married and divorced. In total, 366 participants took part in this study, among which N= 167 were married and N=199 were divorced. The divorced participants’ age range was M= 41±10 and that of married participants was M= 43±11. Other important demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in the table below.

**Table 1.** Sample characteristics.

Sample’s social demographics	Divorced N=199	Married N=167	Both groups 366	%
Age	(23-68) 41±10	(22 -78.) 43±11		
<b>Education level</b>				
Incomplete primary school	2	1	3	0.8
Primary school	7	9	16	4.4
High school	96	70	166	45.4
College degree	21	11	32	8.7
University degree	55	60	115	31.4
Masters or PhD degree	17	13	30	8.2
<b>Employment/occupation</b>				
Full time job position	98	94	192	52.5
Part time job position	38	22	60	16.4
Entrepreneur/craftsman	10	6	16	4.4
Unemployed	23	16	39	10.7
Self employed	4	3	7	1.9
Pension/disability	9	9	18	4.9
Housewife	7	11	18	4.9
Others	5	3	8	2.2
<b>Monthly income</b>				
No personal income	17	11	28	7.7
Less than 400 KM	11	2	13	3.6
400 KM – 800 KM	34	9	43	11.7
800 KM – 1200 KM	40	13	53	14.5
1200 KM – .1500KM	49	41	90	24.6
More than 1500 KM	48	89	137	37.4

**Results**

The analysis of participants' responses led to the conclusion that participants perceive relational factors to be leading factors in marital stability and instability. This was also one of the most frequently named reasons for divorce. Interestingly, both participant groups, married and divorced, responded similarly, listing several individual interpersonal qualities like *understanding* (divorced 46%, married 59.2%) as the top quality for a good and successful marriage, then *love* (divorced 37.1%, married 43.1%), *respect* (divorced 28.6%, married 28.7%), *trust* (divorced 17%, married 17.9%), *tolerance* (divorced 5%, married 17.3%), and *communication skills* (divorced 15%, married 15.5%), as can be seen in the table below.

**Table 2.** *What makes a good/successful marriage?* in both participant groups (N= 366).

What makes a good/successful marriage?	Married N=167	%	Divorced N=199	%
Understanding	99	59.2	92	46.2
Love	72	43.1	74	37.1
Respect	48	28.7	57	28.6
Trust	30	17.9	34	17.0
Tolerance	29	17.3	10	5.0
Talk and communication	26	15.5	30	15.0
Support	20	11.9	17	8.5
Compromise	15	8.9	9	4.5
Attention	16	9.5	15	7.5
Friendship			6	3.0
Finances/money			9	4.5
Agreement	5	2.9	16	8.0
Honesty	8	4.7	10	5.0
Harmony			16	8.0
Appreciation			9	4.5
Common interests and goals	7	4.1		

From the participants' responses it may be concluded that when the quality which participants named as contributing to a good and successful marriage are perceived to be missing, this is a reason to dissolve the marriage, as can be seen in participants responses to the second open-ended question "what is the reason for your divorce?" directed at divorced group of participants.

**Table 3.** Enlisted reasons for divorce (divorced participants, N=199)

Reasons for divorce	F	%
Adultery/infidelity	50	25.1
Alcoholism, drug use	33	16.5
Aggression, violence	31	15.5
Arguments, conflicts,	30	15.0
Jealousy	26	13.0
Misunderstanding	23	11.5
Finances, money, poverty	17	8.5
Discord	17	8.5
Lies, mistrust	16	8.0
Differences in personality, mentality, character, aims, ideas	15	7.5
Disrespect	13	6.5
The in-laws' influence	13	6.5
Lack of or poor communication	12	6.0
Not having children	10	5.0
No love, emotions, intimacy	9	4.5
Gambling	8	4.0
Irresponsibility	7	3.5
Separation, war, travel	6	3.0
Neglect, inattention	6	3.0
Cessation of love and connection	5	2.5
Stinginess	4	2.0
Differences in age, education	4	2.0
Becoming parents	1	0.5

As can be seen from the table above, divorced participants perceive *adultery* to be the leading reason for their divorce (25.1%), followed by *alcohol and drugs* (16.5%), *aggression and violence* (15.5%), *conflicts* (15%), *jealousy* (13%), and *misunderstanding* (11%). All these responses can be categorized as either individual or relational factors. Given the traditional Bosnian cultural habit of many couples to live together with the in-laws and low socio-economic status, we expected these external factors to be cited frequently. However, this was not the case, contrary to our expectations.

### Discussion

As already noted in the method section, participants' answers to the open-ended questions can be categorized either as relational, interpersonal, or external factors. An interesting finding in this case is that *understanding*, as a very important individual and interpersonal variable, is regarded as the most frequently listed and leading factor or quality for a good and successful marriage among both married and divorced participants. At the same time, *misunderstanding* ranks high as the sixth perceived reason for divorce, after *adultery, alcoholism, aggression, conflicts and jealousy, among divorcees*. Since we do not know what participants mean by *understanding*, we asked them to further explain. These were their responses: *Understanding is respecting the partner, loving his / her flaws and tolerance, or adapting to each other, or making compromises, empathy directed at the spouse and suppression of one's own egoism, whims, and frustrations, which cause most conflicts and conflicts compassion for the other, the opposite of indifference and disregard for other people's feelings like sorrow, pain, happiness, needs, it is being tolerant, self-renunciation. Understanding is when two people are on approximately the same or similar intellectual level, and misunderstanding is, of course, the opposite*. Participants also elaborated more on what do they mean by *misunderstanding*, and this is their response: *misunderstanding refers to disrespect for a relationship or marriage. Understanding is actually a resemblance, insight into the*

*soul of another person or "wearing other person's shoes", and depends on emotional intelligence, etc., while misunderstanding is the inability to penetrate other people's needs or lack of desire for that insight. Since each man is a separate person, understanding is to accept him differently and love him with all his flaws and virtues.*

Hence, understanding is respecting each other's individuality while respecting the institution of marriage and all that comes along with it and simply minding one another. What seems to be reflected in the participants' responses regarding understanding and the lack of it, as an important relational and personal variable, can be explained by the *minding model of love* (Boniwell, 2012). According to this model, minding means knowing and being known, attribution, acceptance and respect, reciprocity and continuity.

The "knowing and being known" component of love in the minding love model includes behaviors aimed at learning about each other: questioning and disclosing, knowing about thoughts, feelings, attitudes and past history. "Attributions" are the explanations we have about our partner's behavior. "Acceptance and respect" relate to accepting the partner for who she/he is and respecting him/her for that. "Reciprocity" relates to a sense of equality, when one's gains are approximately equal to one's investments. This is exactly what our participants reported. Finally, "continuity" refers to the need to continue the first four elements as indicated in the term "minding", which is a process rather than a destination, thus also requiring time, continuity, and interpersonal skills.

Gottman (2015), one of the most prominent relationships experts, suggests a marriage works when spouses can enhance their love through several interpersonal skills like nurturing their fondness and admiration, turning towards each other instead of away, letting their spouse influence them, solving their solvable problems, overcoming gridlock, and creating a shared

sense of meaning. Again, going back over participants' explanation of understanding, these interpersonal skills are reflected there, so our findings are in line with Gottman's conclusions. Contrary to having understanding, the lack of it might be related to the individualization factor which shapes peoples' perceptions and understandings of the world, including their expectations of marriage and close relationships (Strandell, 2018). The factor of understanding from our study findings conforms to nurturing fondness and admiration, turning towards one another instead of away, overcoming gridlock, and creating a shared sense of meaning (Finkel, 2018; Gottman, 2015). Similar to our findings, an Iranian study's findings also points to factors like "understanding the spouse" and "understanding the spouse's situation" to be positively correlated with marital stability and satisfaction (Afrasiabi & Jafarizadeh, 2015). Looking at participants' responses, we can see that enlisted relational factors in both, good and successful marriages and reasons for divorce, fit this minding theory of love, particularly respect, reciprocity and continuity, interpersonal skills while the lack of it could be linked to the individualization factor.

However, lots of these relational factors are related to a spouse's personality traits. Gottman's studies (2011; 2012) discuss how negative personality traits have a detrimental effect on a relationship. Conflicts and arguments impair marital satisfaction and marital quality. Conflicts and arguments usually cause emotional injuries by unkind words and behavior which in turn impairs marital stability and affects marital satisfaction negatively. Some research into these issues points to the importance of the presence and nurturing of kindness in intimate and marital relationships, which acts as psychological glue and offers an important form of social support (Gable et al., 2006; Gottman 2011; Gottman 2012; Maisel and Gable, 2008). Independent of Gottman's studies, research shows that kindness, along with emotional stability, is the most important predictor of satisfaction and stability in marriage as it makes each partner feel that the other cares for him or her, that he or she understands, confirms, validates and loves them

(Aloni, 2010; Fredrickson et al, 2008; Pressman, Kraft & Cross, 2015).

It is important to note that kindness does not mean that one should not express anger (Gottman 2011, 2012), but actually know how to express it. There are two ways to do this: by attacking or by explaining why you are hurt and angry which is the better way. When people talk about kindness, they often think of small acts of generosity, but kindness can be the backbone of a relationship/marriage, through daily interaction, with or without gifts. One way to practice kindness is to follow your partner's intentions. Because, even in relationships in which partners are frustrated, there are almost always some positive things and people often try to do the right thing and not hurt one another intentionally. Gottman's research indicates that a lack of interest in a partner's joy alienates the partners. Although it is known that partners should be there for each other when things are not going well, research (Gable and Gonzaga, 2006) confirms that being there for each other when things are going well is actually much more important for relationship quality, and that inadequate reacting to someone's good news can have dramatic consequences for a relationship.

In both groups, participants ranked love as the second quality for a good and successful marriage. Many people claim that love is an indescribable emotion. Maslow and later Rogers claimed that the need for love and belonging is at the bottom of the pyramid of basic needs immediately after physiological or biological needs and the need for security, pointing to its importance. The need for love and belonging includes the need for close intimate relationships and admiration. Love and belonging to people help to overcome feelings of loneliness and alienation, and the very idea of love is a need that drives us to look for partners and commit to them. Every living being wants to be loved, except for people suffering from psychopathy. Love is essential in all close or intimate relations and relationships, such as marriage. The importance and connection of love with marriage has been shown by the results of a large international survey conducted in eleven

countries, on four continents. To the question “If you met a partner who meets all your criteria, would you marry him/her if you are not in love?” over 80% of participants responded negatively (Levine et al., 1995, as cited by Čudina-Obradović, 2006).

However, despite this importance of love for marriage, little is known about love in marriage. Although our participants point out the importance of it, we know little about what they think about love, whether they think that love changes over time and how, what are the determinants, types and especially what is the intensity of love in marital periods before and after childbirth, the child’s departure to school or the child’s departure from the family. Unrealistic expectations and misconceptions about love, intimacy and sexual behavior, i.e. expectations called *romantic myth*, also distort the perception. In addition, we must point out that infatuation and love, although both imply strong feelings for the other person, are often two terms that differ qualitatively. Infatuation rests on a distorted, unrealistic image of the other person because we still do not know them completely. This is characteristic of the initial phase of the relationship or marriage. Love is based on knowing the reality, i.e. positive and negative sides or characteristics, of another person and is found in longer relationships/marriages. Unrealistic expectations are formed in the phase of falling in love when the partner still sees things through the infamous pink glasses. These expectations are also related to conflicts and quarrels later, expressed through the complaint “you were not like that at the beginning of the relationship/marriage”, or “why can’t you be like at the beginning of the relationship/marriage”. Of course, a person is constantly changing, they will never be the same as at the beginning of a relationship/marriage, through aging and different life experiences in the course of the relationship/marriage, especially after major life events, such as the transition to a parental role and/or personal losses.

Research on romantic relationship discusses passionate and compassionate love (Boniwell, 2012; Fehr, Harasymchuk & Sprecher, 2014; Hendrick & Hendrick 2006). Passionate love (PL) is equivalent to a state of infatuation: an intense desire for another person, which can be completely possessing. PL is often characterized by excitement, moments of exultation, feeling accepted, safe and even a sense of union and transcendence, but also by mood swings, anxiety, despair and jealousy. It is commonly believed that falling in love cannot be helped. However, it is usually triggered by identifying fulfilment of one’s needs and desires with another person, or simply projecting one’s ideal onto the other. PL is temporary, because sooner or later, inevitable differences between the idealized and the actual other become so prominent that they can no longer be ignored. Compassionate love reflects a deep affection that people feel for each other. Love that begins with the uncontrollable and unpredictable fire of passion usually quietens into a beautiful glow of compassion, provided it survives the first stage.

Compassionate love may be less intense but is lasting and involves being, doing, staying and growing with the other person (Popovic, 2005). *Being with the other* refers to acceptance, care, respect (including self-respect) and mutual equality. *Doing with the other* means having shared goals or activities and mutual interests, alongside and in addition to the individual ones. Doing sometimes involves helping, comforting, and protecting the other. *Staying with the other* is based on commitment between people. It is assisted by intimacy and closeness. *Growing with the other* involves transcending one’s own interests and a willingness to change. It is a common wisdom that everyone changes in his or her lifetime. Change, therefore, is an essential element of life and relationships. In a partnership, it is important that the rates and directions of change in individuals are, to some extent, compatible. This benefits the relationship and enhances its growth.

Our participants also consider respect, trust, tolerance, communication, and conversation as other frequently and highly ranked qualities for a good and successful marriage following love. Similar results were found in Iran and Lebowakgomo (Mohlatlole, Sithole, & Shirindi, 2018; Zaheri et al., 2016). If we go back to how our respondents explained understanding, we can see that these qualities can be viewed both individually but also as a part of different love and also as part of the quality of understanding, which we have already elaborated. Interestingly, our respondents also mentioned the following relational factors or qualities as factors or qualities necessary for a successful or good marriage: growing together, partner compatibility, sharing responsibilities, joint decisions, perseverance and persistence or courage, mutuality, equality, selflessness, mutual adjustment, partner's separation, maturity or readiness for marriage. However, these were listed less frequently and were ranked lower on the list. Given the traditional Bosnian society and contrary to our expectations, factors like living arrangement, the in-laws, parental roles or not having children were not mentioned as often as reasons for divorce in our study. Of course, this could be related to the participants' socio-demographic characteristics since most of them were fully employed, with an average or higher income than the national average, and have at least a high school or higher degree.

Next to understanding and love, an Iranian study suggests communication to have a positive impact on marital satisfaction (Zaheri et al., 2016) and sudden character change, lack of and poor communication, financial problems, abuse and infidelity were associated with divorce among young couples (Mohlatlole, Sithole, & Shirindi, 2018). Our findings correspond with these findings. We also notice that divorced individuals enlisted adultery/infidelity as the first and most frequent reason for divorce but also named finances, discord/conflict and poor communication.

## Conclusion

Bosnians consider good and successful marriage a constant and committed effort requiring both spouses to show understanding, love empathy, respect, communication and similar relational and intrapersonal factors. Understanding makes marriage last and successful while the lack of it, next to the adultery, violence and aggression and alcohol are most commonly enlisted reasons for divorce among Bosnian divorcees. Our study findings go in line with other similar studies so Bosnian married and divorced individuals consider common positive relational factors in stable marriage and in divorce, just like their contemporaries World wide. Good and successful marriage requires lots of mutual work and effort, nurturing kindness, attention, selflessness, kindness, reciprocity, activity and agility, whilst the lack of such qualities or their opposite might be the reason why people decide to end a marriage, which seems to be true no matter who you are and where you live. This study has some limitations primarily related to the method part, convenience sampling and snow ball recruitment technique. So, generalization is not possible. Our findings provide some guidance in regards to relational factors in quality marriage and reasons for divorce. Also, variables like personality, attachment style, marital longevity, compatibility and/or sexual satisfaction or marriage/divorce longevity, vital factors in marital stability and divorce were not explored. So, it is recommended that future study be of mixed-method design, consider present study's missing factors and even perhaps include married and divorced couples instead of individuals.

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