

Grounded Theory Approach in Discovering the Factors Effective on the Sexual Communication of Iranian Couples

Javad Vakili, PhD Student;
Seyed Ali Kimiaei, PhD;
Hossein Kareshki, PhD; Seyed
Amir AminYazdi, PhD

Department of Counseling and
Education Psychology, Faculty of
Education and Psychology, Ferdowsi
University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran

Correspondence:

Seyed Ali Kimiaei, PhD;
Department of Counseling and
Education Psychology, Faculty of
Education and Psychology, Ferdowsi
University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran
Tel: +98 9155008538
Email: Kimiaee@um.ac.ir
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Abstract

Background: The quality and manner of couples' communication in sexual matters is one of the most important and effective variables on the couples' sexual health and satisfaction. The aim of this study was to discover the factors affecting the couples' sexual communication from the perspective of couples' therapists, couples, and research.

Methods: The present study was conducted qualitatively using the grounded theory method that has three statistical population. In the research section, electronic resources, books, dissertations, and valid journals were used. In interviewing all the Iranian couple therapists and interviewing all couples who were referred to counseling centers in Mashhad, purposeful sampling was used. Data were collected using semi-structured and interactive interviews. For the validity of the data, after saturation, 2 more people were added, and the interview continued. Finally, 13 couple therapists and 21 couples were interviewed. MAXQDA20 software was used for data analysis.

Results: In the text analysis of the interviews with couple therapists, in open coding 62 categories and in axial coding 14 categories; in interviews with couples, in open coding 56 categories and in axial coding 14 categories; and in qualitative analysis of research, in open coding 42 categories and in axial coding 13 categories were obtained. Finally, with the use of triangulation, three main categories of couple, individual, and situation were identified.

Conclusion: According to the results obtained, couple therapists are advised to have a combination of multidimensional attitudes towards the couples' sexual communication and pay attention to it in therapeutic and educational sessions.

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Introduction

Sexual problems are one of the most common issues in couple therapy¹ and several factors are involved in the development and emergence of these problems. One of these factors is communication, which is an essential variable in understanding marital performance² and is an important aspect of sexual relationships. Although

how marital sexual behaviors are transmitted has vital effects on sexual therapy interventions,³ most couples therapy approaches have addressed issues such as relaxation, medication, and the improvement of general marital communication processes.⁴ Also, few studies have examined how couples relate to sexual issues and their effects on sexual relationships.¹ It seems that clinical specialists and researchers neglecting

the sexual communication of couples inadvertently ignore the key component of improving relationships and sexual function.⁵

Researchers believe that participating in sexual discussions provides an opportunity for each couple to become aware of each other's desires and needs and this process can draw a clear and constructive path for couples. According to the theory of social influence, increasing the topics discussed and more self-disclosure lead to closer relations and intimacy. Research shows that there is a positive relationship between sexual communication patterns and self-disclosure with the general communication and that couples who are openly related to each other on various topics are more inclined to expose sexual issues.⁶ Empirical evidence also shows that positive and open communication and conversations about sexual problems and issues are one of the essential components of a sexual relationship⁷ and couples can get acquainted with each other's needs, fears, and problems through it, but still many people find it difficult to talk about sexual aspects with their spouse because of the feeling of danger, rejection, discomfort, lack of confidence in relationships,⁶ and embarrassment or humiliation while self-disclosing their sexual issues.

Although there are not many studies on the manner, nature, and difference between sexual and non-sexual issues,⁸ recent studies show that couples experience sexual communication differently from general communication¹ because marital sexual interactions and communications are different from general communication due to socio-cultural norms and the comfort levels of each couple in sexual discussions for reasons such as socio-cultural norms, personal experiences, and different communication patterns. Couples' communication about sexual issues requires a high level of vulnerability that can make marital adjustment difficult and make talking about sexual needs and feelings challenging.⁹ Therefore, although couples can easily talk about different issues and topics in their relationship, they have problems with sexual issues and challenges and do not feel comfortable.¹

Research related to sexual communication has addressed a variety of conceptualizations. In a definition by Metts and Spitzberg (2017), sexual communication is a means by which individuals select their potential partners for sex, and through those concepts, functions, and effects of sex are discussed.¹⁰ Roels and Janssen (2020) describe sexual frequency as a quantitative indicator of sexuality, but sexual communication as more of a qualitative dimension of people's perception of sex in romantic relationships,¹¹ or in another conception, sexual communication with a partner as an interpersonal process that structures and maintains sexual

interactions¹² and discussions about sexual problems include disclosure of sexual preferences¹³ or sexual concerns and self-disclosure.¹⁴ Although research on sex in general distinguishes between sexual self-disclosure and sexual communication, sexual self-disclosure addresses a person's tendency to engage or not to engage in specific sexual activities, while sexual communication offers a wider range of sex-related behaviors and views¹⁵ and includes various aspects that are not self-disclosure (such as non-verbal statements).¹⁶ For example, a couple may exchange messages about the impact of sex on their relationship (sexual communication) but never discuss their sexual preferences (sexual self-disclosure). On the other hand, although these structures are different, they can also be related; couples who engage in sexual communication feel more comfortable and self-disclosed in expressing sexual desires and preferences directly than couples who do not talk about sex.¹⁵

In addition to the structural and conceptual differences between sexual communications, gender differences¹⁷⁻¹⁹ and individual components¹ are also found in related research. For instance, one of the most obvious differences in these relationships is power, which causes men to physically, emotionally, sexually, or psychologically benefit greatly from power in sex.²⁰ Therefore, it is necessary to focus on both men and women in sexual health programs.¹⁹ Of course, despite these gender differences, something that makes the problem worse is that some studies suggest that these types of patterns may be different for individuals in marital relationships¹⁸ and these gender differences cannot be generalized. This type of pattern of relationships may vary from couple to couple due to cultural and individual differences (such as personality traits).

In the case of research related to communication and relations of sex, it is expected that research in these two fields is highly intertwined; however, sexual researchers tend to ignore communication processes when studying sexual function. On the other hand, communication researchers largely ignore the sexual variables that affect adult romantic relationships. Therefore, theories related to sexual function and communication theories have each been developed in relative isolation from their literature and research tradition, so that the manner of sexual problems from unfavorable communication experience is yet to be well-known.²¹ And what is not clear enough about that is how sex communication affects long-term relationships.¹ The research background of this issue also shows that unfortunately few studies have been done in this field.²² For this reason, studying sexual communication, how people feel about it, and what they think about it becomes more and more necessary so that we can understand why some people avoid communication and interactions about sex and help

couples facilitate how to have sex communication.⁸ Considered as a taboo, rejected, and shameful topic, sex communication is challenging and many couples do not see sex as a simple matter, and such factors make it difficult to research the quality of sex and what constitutes it, especially because sexual communication and intimacy are often formed passively and indirectly between couples and this itself becomes another factor to make the phenomenon of decoding couples' communication and its measurement more difficult for researchers.²³

In general, the large difference in the quality of sexual communication between couples has led the researchers to try to find out the corresponding reasons.²⁴ A review of various studies suggests that sexual communication is a multidimensional structure²⁵ and a complex phenomenon and discussion about sexual issues with one's spouse includes a wide range of sexual behaviors and views.²³ It seems that the structure and characteristics of sexual communication are doubled due to the socio-cultural sensitivity of different societies; also, because sexuality is a culture-dependent phenomenon, it is difficult to generalize the results of research from one cultural context to another. Therefore, researchers need to pay attention to cultural considerations in the factors affecting sexual communications; Because in different studies, the views of couples and therapists about this concept have been less studied and research is scarce in this field in Iran, this study aimed to analyze and describe sexual experiences of different couples, the views of clinical professionals through interviews, and review of various scientific articles; we also aimed to find out how sexual communication takes place and what factors affect it to guide the couples and experts in the field of couples through the identified components.

Methods

The present study was qualitatively conducted using grounded theory method. To increase the validity, we used three methods. Statistical population included:

A. In the research section, electronic sources, books, dissertations, and valid journals related to the subject were collected. From the texts related to the research topic, 39 sources were selected to the extent of saturation of categories. These sources in the Latin section were limited to the years 1985 to 2021, and in the Persian section, they were limited to the years 1386 to 1400.

B. In the interview with the couple's therapists, a purposeful sampling method was used to select from all couple therapists in Iran with a doctorate in psychology or counseling with 5 years of experience in occupational therapy with couples, from whom 13 couple therapists were finally interviewed until saturation.

C. In the section of interviews with couples, the interviews were conducted under the supervision of the authors of the research, who were the university's academic staff and had PhD degrees in counseling or psychology and by second author of the research who was a PhD student. All of them had at least one scientific work in this field. In this part, out of all couples who referred to counseling centers in Mashhad, the sample was chosen by purposive sampling method. In this way, all counseling centers were listed and based on the 13 districts of Mashhad, 4 districts and among these 4 districts, 5 counseling centers were randomly selected. In the next stage, by randomly selecting the clients of these centers, they talked to the people who were willing to be interviewed and were informed about the purpose and method of the interview; after obtaining the informed consent, the interview was conducted. Eventually, interviews with 21 couples were conducted up until the data were saturated. In both stages, to validate the data, we continued interviews with couples and couple therapists after saturation of the interviews to two more people.

Given that this study focuses on the complex and hidden aspects of the sexual communication, using the grounded theory and applying the emic and introspective methodology will lead the researchers to a deeper understanding of this phenomenon. Grounded theory provides the possibility of discovering the opinion of active and involved people, identifying and describing the social reality without imposing the monotonous articles and predetermined per-stories. In other words, according to sGlaser, the theory in this approach should emerge exploratory.²⁶ Also in this research, a systematic method was used to examine the content of the interviews, conceptualize, and extract categories. The systematic design of data-driven theories emphasizes the application of data steps through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The data encryption process was performed during data collection. In open coding, the data were carefully broken down into the smallest components, and in the second stage, the data were compared and classified based on the differences and similarities. After repeated slips and moves between the classes and codes, the classification was done, similar codes were placed in classes that could be identified and understood by rational names.²⁷ There are assumptions about the relationship between classification and the conceptual framework that guide the researcher to collect the next data. New data were compared with all data at the same time to reveal the desired centrality between the data. In the third step, by selective coding, an attempt was made to discover the data center and classification was selected. During this stage, the concept that referred to other classes and was related to them, that was sexual communication, was recognized as a central variable. In this study, the use of predefined classes was avoided

so that the classes could be extracted from the data, and MAXQDA20 software was used for the explained procedure. To observe the qualitative characteristics of the research, we utilized three criteria of acceptability, verifiability, and reliability. As to acceptability and confirmation of the findings, copies of interviews and research reports were made available to the participants to indicate their agreement and disagreement with the content and ensure the research findings. For ensuring the reliability of the findings, an attempt was made to document the research processes and decisions in the article. Finally, the criterion of verifiability of the results was compared with the research background,

using theoretical discussions to explain them (Code of ethics: IR.UM.REC.1398.125).

Results

Tables 1 and 2 show the demographic features of the participants in the interviews, and Tables 3 and 4 show the analysis of the obtained data.

According to the data shown in Table 1, the participants had different personal and demographic characteristics, and the couples' ages varied from 22 to 51 years, their education varied from middle school degree to PhD with the average marriage duration of 10 years.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the Iranian couples

Gender	Age	Education	Occupation	Type of marriage	Duration of marriage
Male	51	PhD	Teacher	Arranged marriage	30
Female	49	Diploma	Housewife	Arranged marriage	28
Female	28	Middle school degree	Housewife	Arranged marriage	10
Male	50	Master's degree	Teacher	Arranged marriage	15
Female	34	PhD	Doctor	Love marriage	4
Female	25	Associate degree	Salesperson	Love marriage	5
Female	31	Bachelor's degree	Employee	Arranged marriage	5
Female	49	Bachelor's degree	Housewife	Arranged marriage	8
Female	45	PhD	Doctor	Love marriage	12
Male	45	Diploma	Salesperson	Arranged marriage	8
Female	36	Master's degree	Housewife	Love marriage	8
Female	39	Diploma	Housewife	Arranged marriage	22
Male	47	Master's degree	Employee	Arranged marriage	14
Female	22	Bachelor's degree	Librarian	Love marriage	4
Male	29	Diploma	Hairdresser	Arranged marriage	6
Male	32	Master's degree	Accountant	Love marriage	2
Female	30	Middle school degree	Salesperson	Love marriage	5
Male	37	Middle school degree	Watchman	Love marriage	7
Female	26	Bachelor's degree	Employee	Arranged marriage	5
Male	51	Diploma	Farmer	Arranged marriage	12
Male	29	Diploma	Mechanic	Arranged marriage	4

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of couple therapists

Gender	Age	Work experience in couple therapy	Education	Field of study
Male	55	20	PhD	Counseling
Male	52	21	Master degree	Psychology
Male	29	5	PhD	Counseling
Female	45	6	PhD	Counseling
Male	33	8	PhD	Counseling
Male	48	15	PhD	Psychology
Male	31	5	PhD	Psychology
Mal	55	27	Master's degree	Psychology
Female	48	21	PhD	Psychology
Male	44	18	PhD	Psychology
Female	37	7	PhD	Counseling
Male	56	30	Master's degree	Psychology
Female	46	16	PhD	Psychology

Table 3: Number of open, axial, and selective codes from the analysis of interviews and research

From the analysis	Open Coding	Axial coding	Selective coding
Interviews with couple therapists	62	14	3
Interviews with couples	56	14	3
Research's	42	13	3

Table 4: Main categories, sub-categories and primary codes obtained from the analysis of interviews and research

Main categories	Subcategories	Primary codes
Individual indicators	Individual families	Sexual education of parents, covering up in the family, repression and no-dialogues in the family, the role of parents in talking about sexual issues, family communication patterns, learning from the family
	Personality characteristics	Extroverted/introverted, passive, self-image, personality type
	Early experiences and trauma	Child and adolescent trauma, sexual abuse, childhood and adolescence experiences, previous relationship experience, previous relationship injury
	Attachment styles and relevant emotions	Safe, secure and anxious attachment, avoidance, feelings of shame and guilt, feelings of threat and anxiety, feelings of security, Feeling ashamed of the therapist, fear of intimacy, feeling of vulnerability, fear and trembling, feeling shame and embarrassment for talking, disgust and hatred, rejection
Couple indicators	Sexual beliefs and schemas	Girls being shameless, sexual schema, communication beliefs, sexual attitude, beliefs and attitudes, sexual stereotype, sexual self-image
	Life cycle	Early married life, first relationship experience, longer engagement period
	Commitment in relation	Infidelity, trust in a relationship, having a relationship with the opposite sex
	Understand and evaluate each other's messages and needs	Misunderstanding the message, understanding the needs of the spouse, understanding the physical condition, respecting the needs, understanding each other, inconsistency of the messages and signals, not understanding the message
	Differences in verbal / non-verbal process and content	Differences in couples' tastes in the content of conversations and topics of interest (talking about emotional issues and expressions of interest, positions, sexual fantasy, and physical attractiveness)
		Differences of couples' interests in the method of declaration
		And expressing need (verbal / non-verbal, outspoken / gesture)
Difference in verbal / non-verbal jokes		
Situational indicators	Sociocultural	Specific sexual language and speaking in mystery
		Differences in non-verbal (physical) / verbal interests
	Demographic	Differences of taste in verbal / non-verbal foreplay and aftertaste
		Differences in couples' interests at the time and duration of sexual conversation (talk before / at the same time or after the relationship)
	Religious values and beliefs	Different ways of speaking, tone, and rhythm of words in sexual matters
		Ethnic prejudices, cultural taboos, subcultures, the role of culture and social issues in sexual communications
	Cyberspace	Age difference, education, economic situation, and having less time for sex
Educational knowledge	Religious taboos, religious beliefs, ingrained religious misconceptions	
	Watching porn movies, animated movies, talking on the phone, texting, learning this type of communication through cyberspace	
	Teaching in schools, learning from friends and peers, sexual intelligence, teaching effective communication skills, awareness of the quality and manner of communication, awareness of the role of orgasm and sexual abundance in sexual communication, writing down strategies for solving sexual problems, teaching sexual communication patterns, sexual self-awareness	

According to the data shown in Table 2, the couple therapists were aged from 29 to 56 years, most of them had PhD degree, and 3 of them had MA degree with high experience and their field of study was counseling or psychology.

According to the categories extracted from the content of interviews with couple therapists, couples, and conducted research and triangulation among them, selective coding was performed, in which the central codes were named in three main categories: couple, individual and situational (Table 5). The results of the data are presented in the following Tables.

Discussion

This study aimed to discover the factors affecting the sexual communication in 14 sub-categories and three main categories of individual, couple and situation, which are reviewed separately.

Individuals' families: Obviously, one of the effective factors in couples' sexual communication is the status and role of the family, and parents are an important source of information about sexual issues for their children.^{28, 29} Theories of family communication patterns have provided a proper theory for the effect of general communication on sexual consequences of individuals.³⁰ Open-family communications and interactions allow parents to share their views on sexuality with their children. These sexual attitudes are passed on to children and reflected upon in the future lives of children.³¹ This is why teens who talk openly and casually about sex will have more committed sex with their partner in the future.³²

Sexual beliefs and schemas: Psychological schemas have a profound effect on people's communication behaviors³³ In explaining the role of schemas in sexual issues and its impact on sexual

Table 5: Sample sentences obtained from interviews with couple therapists and couples

Categories	Sample interviews with specialists	Sample sentences from interviews with couples
Individuals' families	"It is important that what the style and structure of the couple's families are regarding sexual issues."	"My family tried to open this issue in the envelope from a young age, so I am now comfortable with things like this with my husband."
Sexual beliefs and schemas	"Stereotypes often prevent them from talking about their sexual issues or expressing their needs."	"Since childhood, we were taught not to do this, this is a shame for girls and we believed that we should not say these things to anyone."
Personality characteristics	"The type of people can also be influential, for example, whether he is introverted or extroverted to express his needs."	"You know, I think it depends on the personality of people; now, I'm a kind of person who speaks easily about these or other issues, but my wife does not speak much."
Attachment styles and emotions	"For example, insecure dependency style may prevent a person from talking about his/her needs and problems in this field"	"I do not feel comfortable going to him for these issues because he rejects me."
Early experiences and trauma	"Incest can be very influential and bad."	"That damn thing happened when I was 13 years old; it made me avoid such things and even now that I have a child, I cannot be as comfortable as I want."
Differences in verbal / non-verbal process and content	"Even people can have a certain listening style and a specific sexual language of their own.", "Communication is not just talking; it ranges be from head movements to staring to blinking and even the rhythm and melody may be different from ordinary speech."	"I would like to talk more after sex, but my husband sleeps", "I like to talk more and I calm down this way, but he likes to physically joke around."
Life cycle	"I think at different times in life, these conditions can change, such as the period of engagement or marriage or the birth of the first child."	"It was good in the beginning, but we have spent less time on this issue since the child was born"
One's perception and evaluation from the messages and needs of his/ her spouse:	"They do not have a proper understanding of their partner's emotional and sexual needs."	"Many times he does not understand me and my needs at all; I go to the bathroom, I put on make-up, I start flirting with him...he does not understand; even then he says 'how could I know that you meant sex ... you should have said ..' well, I am a woman, and it is easier for that way"
Extramarital relationship	"Sometimes, the reason for having little time to have sex and communicate is because they've entered another relationship"	"Look, if I talk about myself as an example, well, since I found out my husband has had sex with other people, I don't have any emotion to have sex, let alone to talk about this issue I just let him meet his needs"
Socio-cultural factors	"Well, for example, when we go to the north of Iran, it is easier to express these than the south of Iran, and in any case, it is different depending on the common and dominant subcultures."	With the ethnic prejudices that we have, it is very difficult to talk about such things."
Educational-knowledge	"Getting training in the field of communication skills may be effective in sexual issues."	"Nobody taught us such things unless we were secretly learning them from schoolmates or movies", "Lack of adequate education"
Religious values and beliefs	"Sometimes, religious beliefs may be considered a taboo in these matters"	"My husband is a religious man and does not cooperate much in such things."
Cyberspace	"Sometimes, a joke, known as R-rated is sent in the form of a text message, and of course this is before sex. "	"Sex animations I see with my wife have helped us a lot."
Demographics	"Sometimes, a great age difference between husband and wife makes it difficult and one may be more interested than the other."	"Since his workload and economic problems have increased, we spend less time on such things and it's mostly to meet the urge."

behaviors,³⁴ it can be said that sexual schemas originate from a person's previous experiences and it is effective in cognitively determining the sexual dimensions of the individual and encompasses a wide range of sexual dimensions, including sexual tendencies, sexual behavior, sexual attitudes, and cognitive representation of one's sexual identity and because a person's self-esteem affects how he or she behaves; it also affects the processing of sexual information as well as directing sexual behavior.³⁵

Personality characteristics: Personality plays a role in communication, and one of the possible areas of exploration in understanding the challenges of sexual communication is the difference between sexual partners and sexual pleasure. As personality

characteristics directly affect couples' communication styles,³⁶ in sex, also they play a key role in the comfort of people; many people, based on their personality type, find sex communication during sex much more difficult than sex itself. Personality characteristics shape the nature of erotic conversation and are related to individual attitudes, behaviors, and tendencies in sexual activity. Various studies show that personality predicts the likelihood or frequency of engagement in sexual activity and sexual satisfaction.¹⁶

Attachment styles and emotions: Attachment styles are the basis of individuals' relationships and affect the romantic relationships and sexual performance of the couple.¹⁶ In addition, various studies have shown that attachment is associated with a

variety of sexual outcomes including sexual behavior, sexual identity, and sexual satisfaction. In general, it can be said that because sex plays an important role in intimacy and emotional connection, and since sexual communication requires very sensitive and personal revelations, in sexual communication with one's spouse, a person receives a feeling of vulnerability and sees the relationship as a threatening context and has difficulty expressing his/her needs to their partners.³⁷

Early experiences and trauma: Differences in sexual identity, history of sexual abuse, and sexual trauma are the factors that can affect the comfort of people in sexual communication and create problems in sexual discussions.¹ For many people with sexual trauma, having sex, even in the most lovely and satisfactory way can cause a lot of confusion between the past and the present; in other words, past mental and physical memories can relate to feelings of vulnerability to sexual intimacy in the present relationship. Therefore, when one of the couples has sexual trauma, alleviating that problem is a very complex process for both partners,³⁸ and how a partner reacts to the self-disclosure of his or her spouse's sexual trauma is very important.³⁹

Differences in verbal/non-verbal process and content: Both verbal and non-verbal communication are related to the context of sexual communication,¹⁶ and the exchange of verbal and non-verbal messages is essential for optimal sexual communication.⁴⁰ Research also shows that enriching couples' sexual communication, including verbal, non-verbal sexual interactions, sexual self-expression, including touching, hugging, and receiving verbal and non-verbal reinforces, can have a positive effect on sexual relations and practice.⁴¹ Sexual function, along with other factors, depends on the couples' verbal, nonverbal, and sexual language communication, and specific sexual language patterns are observed in different couples.¹⁷

Life cycle: Relationships change throughout life, and life events such as childbirth and sexual problems (decreased sexual desire and erectile dysfunction) affect sexual issues.³

Understanding the evolution of long-term relationships is very important in terms of the evolution of couples' sex lives, but there is little information about the role of sexuality and the way it should be discussed in the long time, the way sexual issues proceed in the normal course of a long-term relationship, and different stages of life.¹ In Fallah et al.'s (2018) research, sexual satisfaction and marital satisfaction decreased in the life cycle stages;⁴² also, in Huang's (2010) research, people spoke openly about sexual issues, but the quality and quantity of sex decreased over time.⁴³

One's perception and evaluation from the messages and needs of his/ her spouse: During

interpersonal interactions, one party discloses important wishes, needs, or information about him/herself to the other party, and the latter provides a supportive response. The extent and level of response is also based on subjective assessments and the extent the other party understands, evaluates, and pays attention during repetitive interactions.⁴⁴ Therefore, when couples talk and converse,⁴⁵ understanding the spouse and responding to each other's needs can lead to a more intimate and comfortable sexual feeling to exchange messages and sexual self-disclosure.⁴⁶ Since when people come to this understanding, their spouse understands and pays attention to their needs, in response to the spouse, they show more interaction and sexual communication to increase intimacy and show more desire to their sexual needs.⁴⁷

Extramarital relationship: When couples' relationship is not efficient, their satisfaction with marriage decreases and paves the way for infidelity.⁴⁸ Research also shows that communication patterns predict marital infidelity and couples who are involved in infidelity generally do not have a quality communication.⁴⁹ On the other hand, with the occurrence of infidelity, people communicate more and more in a destructive way and respond less constructively; of course, how couples communicate after infidelity also depends on the seriousness of the extramarital relationship; for example, in very serious cases of infidelity such as sexual infidelity, people are less likely to react constructively, but following less serious infidelity, people try to respond to the relationship in a constructive way.⁵⁰

Socio-cultural factors: Culture is an important and effective factor in cognition, emotions, motivation, and behavior and in all aspects of life, including sexual issues.⁵¹ Attitudes toward sex and understanding the role of sexual communication are strongly influenced by culture.⁵² Cultural norms in different societies shape attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors that trigger or suppress sexual self-disclosure in a relationship. Research shows that the problems of intercultural couples in sexual communications are unique and provide more conditions for misunderstanding in couples. Therefore, research in the field of sexual communications is necessary to increase knowledge about the differences and challenges faced by intercultural couples in the issues and sexual communications of couples. For understanding basic assumptions and cultural differences, expectations to create a common meaning of sexuality and dialogue is needed.⁵³

Educational knowledge: Various studies show that open and effective communication in sexual issue⁵⁴ and communication skills are related to the quality of relationship satisfaction and promote sexual satisfaction.^{1, 22, 55}

Although those communication skills that people

learn from other aspects of life are generalized to sexual situations, there are factors that differentiate sexuality from other communication issues. Factors such as taboo, privacy issues or emotions may cause people to refrain from raising sexual issues because they are afraid to send a negative message to their partner or upset their spouse, so sexual communication requires special training and education.⁵⁴

Religious values and beliefs: Religious beliefs are one of the factors that determine whether people with sexual problems go to sex therapy. These beliefs may lead to resistance to treatment, so therapists who are sensitively attentive to the clients' religious beliefs are more likely to succeed in their treatment.⁵⁶ In Jayne's study (2019), the findings showed that the more limited the families deal with sexual issues and the more they emphasize religious values in childhood, the more the children experience sexual anxiety in the future.⁵⁷

Cyberspace: The use of pornography and the health of couples are largely a function of different patterns of couples in using pornography. With this regard, several studies^{58, 59} show that patterns of using pornography help to understand open sexual communication between couples. Research shows that people who watch pornographic movies with their spouses have more open sex than people who do not. In addition, people who disagree with their spouse about the use of pornographic films and watch these films alone avoid sex and experience less intimacy than those who agree with their spouse.⁵⁸

Demographics: It is clear that, in addition to communication components, there are also demographics components that may prevent desirable sexual communication in couples.¹ Studies that have linked demographic features to sexual communication, economic status of couples⁶⁰ and gender differences between men and women can be named.¹⁹

Conclusion

Based on the general picture of the results of this research and by pondering upon the interviews and research, what has been considered and argued more than anything else is the phenomenon of sexual communication with its complexities which is influenced by various factors. What challenges this issue the most is the simultaneous, separate, and paired combination of these factors as it is possible to change from a couple's relationship to another and from person to person. Accordingly, the present study recommends situational, individual, and couple factors in a multidimensional manner; it seems that a combination of multidimensional attitudes toward couples' sexual communication is necessary in any relationship that is unique to the couples, and it should be considered in medical and educational sessions. The limitations of the present study include:

1. This research has been done on people who were

willing to cooperate, so care should be taken in generalizing the results.

2. Due to the quality of the present study, other tools and quantitative research should be used in this field to achieve more comprehensive results by combining qualitative and quantitative results.

3. There is a taboo of talking about marital sexual issues in Iran.

Ultimately, it is suggested that in preparing educational and treatment packages for couples' sexual issues, the components of the present study should be considered and the examples of sexual communication according to the culture of each society are recommended to be examined.

Authors' Contribution

This research is extracted from the doctoral dissertation in Ferdowsi University of Mashhad entitled "Compilation of the couples' sexual communication pattern counseling package and determining its effectiveness on sexual satisfaction, sexual self-disclosure, and sexual intimacy". All authors have contributed equally in preparing this paper, such as conducting interviews, analyzing data, and finally extracting categories and preparing the manuscript.

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