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Exploring the Lived Experiences of Marital Intimacy among Nepali Married Couples: A Transcendental Phenomenological Approach

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Abstract

There is a widespread agreement in the literature that marital intimacy is positively associated with relationship satisfaction. A growing body of literature on marriage and family has focused increasingly on sexual and emotional intimacy. However, little is known about other facets of intimacy. Hence, the objective focuses on exploring married couples' lived experiences of various facets of marital intimacy. The present study is informed by a transcendental phenomenological qualitative approach to analyse data from the semi-structured interviews and generate the overarching themes. Criterion-based purposive sampling of 28 females and males (i.e., fourteen intimate couples) from Pokhara participated in the present study. The thematic analysis demonstrated five significant themes that couples attached to the facets of intimacy such

as emotional intimacy (feeling of closeness); social intimacy (social bonding); sexual intimacy (physical and non-physical); intellectual intimacy (enriching each other's mind) and recreational intimacy (bonding through activities of fun and enjoyment). The results demonstrated that various facets of intimacy are experienced positively in married Nepali couples. This study contributes to the body of current literature by examining married couples' actual intimate

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experiences and within the context of Bowen's family system theory, which supports the study's findings. The study results have practical implications for marital therapists, counsellors and clinicians. Limitations of the study have been discussed, which are potential future research areas.

Keywords: Marital intimacy, Nepali married couples, qualitative analysis, semi-structured interviews

INTRODUCTION

A considerable amount of literature on family and marriage has highlighted couple intimacy issues as an essential aspect of relationship satisfaction (Martin & Tardif, 2014; Dandurand & Lafontaine, 2013; Nainian & Nik-Azin, 2013). Further, studies have concluded that intimacy significantly contributes to marital satisfaction (Kim, 2013; Yoo et al., 2014). However, other studies on intimacy have concluded that the absence of intimacy in a couple's relationship may lead to incompatibility, separation and desertion in marriage (Duffey et al., 2004; Kim, 2013; Yoo et al., 2014). Therefore, intimacy is essential in interpersonal relationships (Charlemagne-Badal et al., 2014; Sneed et al., 2011).

Scholars have commonly characterized intimacy as an individual's subjective experiences of closeness and connectedness (Martin & Tardif, 2014) despite having no agreement on the underlying concept of intimacy. For instance, Bagarozzi (2001) defines intimacy as closeness, resemblance, and a private romantic or emotional exchange that necessitates familiarity with and comprehension of the other person to convey thoughts and feelings. Similarly, Sternberg (1986) defines intimacy as intense sentiments of closeness, connection, and bonding. Likewise, Chelune et al. (1984) define intimacy as a process between two people when they open up to one another and learn about their deepest, most personal thoughts and feelings. This study, however, conceptualizes a definition of intimacy offered by Schaefer and Olson (1981) that emphasizes intimacy's multidimensional characteristics by centering on the relational and interactive aspects of the intimacy process. To them, a true intimate relationship is one in which both partners expect to continue experiencing mutually satisfying closeness and intimacy over time.

Additionally, academics have employed a range of methodologies to examine closeness. Among these include the creation of scales for evaluating various facets of intimacy (Schaefer & Olson, 1981; Waring & Reddon, 1983); evaluation of specific facets of intimacy, such as social closeness (Miller & Lefcourt, 1982), love (Sternberg, 1997), and intimacy-related anxiety (Descutner, & Thelen, 1991). Some have concentrated on a specific intimacy-related topic, like self-disclosure (Reis & Shaver, 1988). A few studies have concentrated on relationship commitment (Weigel & Ballard-Reisch, 1999). However, the present study conceptualizes the PAIR intimacy scale (Schaefer & Olson, 1981) as the basis for exploring five significant intimacy areas: emotional, social, sexual, intellectual and recreational.

Existing studies have only considered one facet of pair closeness, such as the emotional or sexual aspects (Cordova et al., 2005; Litzinger & Gordon, 2005;

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van Lankveld et al., 2018; Yoo et al., 2014), interpersonal dynamics within couples (Mirgain & Cordova, 2007), communication (Gable et al., 2006), and sexual closeness (Taghiyar et al., 2015). Others have investigated closeness to God (Davis et al., 2013; Holland et al., 2016). These studies, however, may not accurately represent intimacy between couples. Moreover, studies focusing on all the dimensions of marital intimacy are relatively rare (Palit, 2013). Further, a comprehensive review of the literature on marital intimacy uncovered two significant study gaps. The first gap is as most studies have failed to emphasize critical dimensions of marital intimacy. Few studies have highlighted marital relationships in Nepali marriages, such as Compernelle (2021), Rai and Danggal (2021), Van 't Noordende et al. (2016), and McGhee et al. (2021). Still, the focus is limited to sexual and reproductive health and marital relationship, intimate partner violence (IPV) and marital relationship, and husband's labor migration and marital relationships. However, to our knowledge, relatively little is known about the experiences of intimacy among married Nepali couples. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to explore the experiences of intimacy in arranged marriage contexts such as Nepal. The second gap, as most past research on marital intimacy has been undertaken in a western environment, and its conclusions cannot be applied to non-western contexts (Sadeghi et al., 2012). Due to the cultural variations between Western and eastern couples, various individuals have diverse perspectives on intimacy (Bejanyan et al., 2015). Therefore, the objective was to explore the lived experience of intimacy among married Nepali couples and how they relate to various dimensions of intimacy. Based on the identified research gaps, the following two research questions have been focused on:

- a) How do married couples in Nepal understand and relate the various dimensions of marital intimacy?
- b) What are the lived experiences of married Nepali couples about marital intimacy?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bowen's family system theory (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988) provides a framework for understanding intimate relationships among couples (Palit, 2013). According to the family systems theory, each family member is greatly influenced by the family's structure, functioning, and transactional patterns (Miller et al., 1985). Family systems theory places emphasis on reciprocity and contends that as people are essential elements of these systems, their interactions, roles, and culture have a mutually reinforcing effect (Schadler, 2016). With the help of family systems theory, we can get a comprehensive picture of the overall system, including the people inside it, their interactions with one another, and the subsystems within it, such as those between spouses, children, and parents, or between extended family and the society at large (Cox & Paley, 2003). Similarly, the dynamics of a family are defined by the feedback loops and mutual support they provide one another (Guttman, 1991; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). This form of reciprocity can be comprehended via the theoretical lens of descriptive and organismic family systems (Dilworth-

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Anderson et al., 2005). The key to reciprocity, for instance, is interdependence and mutually influencing other people's behaviour inside the family. Furthermore, the human system is distinguished by its self-reflexivity (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993), which allows individuals to objectively evaluate their own and others' actions (Guttman, 1991). Members of the family have the ability to evaluate their actions and make adjustments as necessary (Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993).

However, Bowen's conceptualization of couple intimacy based on wholeness, flexibility, boundary, reciprocity and self-reflexivity is relatively rare in intimacy studies. Further, Bowen's family system theory has not been well used in the intimacy literature. Therefore, the current study used the concept of wholeness, flexibility, boundary, reciprocity and self-reflexivity from Bowen's family system theory to support the idea of couple intimacy. Intimacy in this study was defined as having multiple facets. It was assessed in five facets such as emotional, social, sexual, intellectual and recreational intimacy, to explore more specific details of intimacy issues.

Mackey et al. (2000) found that intimate relationships flourished when partners engaged in mutually enjoyable activities or expressed similar emotions. In many cultures, including Iran's, women are seen as the primary caregivers for their children and the household (Brown et al., 2017). Workload frustration is a common source of complaints from women. Relational intimacy suffers when one partner is frustrated (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Ferreira et al., 2013). The necessity for a balance between togetherness and individuality is highlighted by family systems theory (Brown, 1999). Existing studies conclude that spending time together is essential for fostering closeness and intimacy in relationships between partners (Laser-Maira & Nicotera, 2019). Additionally, spending time together relieves stress in relationships and improves communication (Milek et al., 2015; Yellig, 2011).

Prior studies indicated that the duration of marriage influences the growth of intimacy among couples (Hinchliff & Gott, 2004). Further, couples who have been married for more extended periods increase intimacy in their relationships compared to newly married couples (Ferreira et al., 2013). In addition, the length of marriage has been reported to improve different aspects of intimacy (Palit, 2013). Moreover, previous empirical studies on intimacy also conclude that couples who spend time together are more likely to feel connected to one another and relieve stress (Milek et al., 2015), and couples who spend time together are better able to communicate with one another (Yellig, 2011). The longer a woman has been married, the more likely she is to be intimate with her husband (Kardan-Souraki et al., 2018). Marriage intimacy may suffer when one partner has a hectic work schedule (Ferreira et al., 2013). Few other studies highlight that having children reduces a couple's quality time together (Barnet-Verzat et al., 2011). For this reason, couples need to spend time together because neglecting to do so can damage romance (Ward, 1998), lead to fights (Goldberg et al., 2008), and disruption (Nyström & Ohrling, 2004).

Similarly, studies show that couples who spend much time together can become bored (Aron et al., 2000). There has been no conclusive evidence from

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these studies. Some researchers have found no correlation between couple time and increased intimacy (Jiang & Hancock, 2013). Family systems theory provides an explanation for this openness to change in the form of self-reflection. A concept like this sheds light on how a household combats monotony by introducing new traditions. According to empirical research, varying daily routines significantly improve marital closeness (Ferreira et al., 2013).

Findings from previous studies imply that spending time together doing things you both enjoy is a crucial component of a healthy intimate relationship (Kobra et al., 2018). If you and your spouse have been having marital strife, maybe relaxing together may help (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008). Couples can strengthen their bond and acceptance of one another by engaging in social activities together and learning from the experiences of others, including witnessing the relationships of people in the community (Palit, 2013). When a person's social circle backs their relationship, they are more inclined to show their spouse affection and dedication (Sinclair et al., 2015).

Prior studies have concluded that long-term couples benefit more from social networking than men (Ghalami et al., 2013; Ferreira et al., 2013). Couples with familiar friends are closer (Ferreira et al., 2013). In conclusion, the research shows that no one component has a decisive impact on sexual intimacy in marriage. Whether a couple is close or far at any given time is influenced by several things. Perhaps this explains why researchers have come to seemingly opposite conclusions about what helps couples feel more relative to one another in their marriages. Similarly, existing research on marital intimacy oversampled western couples, as shown by the literature above. It is possible that western sample results do not apply to eastern cultural pairings (Sadeghi et al., 2012).

Few qualitative studies (Jensen et al., 2014; Sandberg, 2020; Palit, 2013; Štulhofer et al., 2020; Goldberg et al., 2014; Ahlborg & Strandmark, 2006) were conducted in the past. However, the findings of these studies cannot be applied to other contexts, their methodology is limited, and few studies focus on intimate relationships. Therefore, this research investigated the various facets of intimacy experienced by married couples in Nepal. Nevertheless, to the best of our knowledge, there is a shortage of qualitative studies examining the nature of intimacy between partners.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study employed a transcendental phenomenological qualitative approach to explore the married couple's lived experiences of marital intimacy. The study also uncovered other dimensions of marital intimacy and the participants shared their experiences. The study intended to uncover the meaning of an experience and understand the participant's experiences in their context (Patton, 2002; Moustakas, 1994; Dahl & Boss, 2005). To sensitize the concept of intimacy and exploration of the phenomena, PAIR (Personal Assessment of Intimacy in Relationship) scale was reviewed to capture various dimensions of intimacy. The process provided initial directions to investigate the phenomena of intimacy experienced by married couples in Nepal. Additionally, reviewing the

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PAIR scale provided the source of information to design initial questions, the data collection method, and the data analysis process.

The data in this study were analyzed using thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012; Guest et al., 2012). Field data and semi-structured interviews were analyzed to identify overarching themes related to the study's objectives (Wengraf, 2001). Fourteen married Nepali couples from Pokhara voluntarily participated in this study. These couples ranged from 28 to 50 years. Most participants had master's degrees (12), some had bachelor's (8) and intermediate degrees (7), and very few (1) had completed high school. All indicated they were currently employed. Twelve participants worked in academia (teaching), whereas fourteen worked in a bank (six wives). There were only two participants who had a government job. Among fourteen interviewed couples, only one indicated they had a love marriage, and others had an arranged marriage. Participants also showed that the shortest duration of marriage was five years, and the most extended length of marriage was twenty-seven years, with most couples having at least two children from their marriage. The present study evaluated the sample size by applying the "theoretical saturation" criterion, as defined by Flick (2009), which states that each extra participant adds little to what has previously been learned. Similarly, Rubin & Rubin (1995) argue that the key is whether the response is "comprehensive" rather than how many people are questioned. Therefore, meeting the theoretical saturation criterion and comprehension aspect, this study was based on semi-structured interviews with 14 married couples.

The participants of the study were recruited based on criterion-based purposive sampling. The criteria for participation were intimately engaged couples who had been married for at least five years and had at least one child. The purpose and the need for the involvement were made clear to the couples involved in the study before they gave their approval (informed consent). The participant information survey form included the primary investigator's contact information. Potential interviewees were vetted back then to ensure they were comfortable with the process and could handle the content of the interview before they were scheduled. The interviewing took place between January and June of 2021.

Twenty narrative-based open-ended questions were used in a semi-structured interview with the participants. The checklist of the semi-structured interview protocol was prepared using the constructs and concepts from the PAIR Scale (Schaefer & Olson, 1981), which encompassed five dimensions of marital intimacy and marital intimacy needs questionnaire (MINQ) Scale (Bagarozzi, 1997), which included nine dimensions of marital intimacy. The semi-structured interview method is ideal for understanding people's complex or emotionally sensitive views and attitudes (Barriball & While, 1994). The semi-structured interview is critical because it allows the participant to express various opinions by focusing on the essential themes. The interview method should be utilized when the goal of the study is to discover the significance that the participant ascribes to their daily activities (Flick, 2009).

The study's transferability and dependability depend on how closely the research strategy and context are related in other situations. Therefore, whether

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they hold another position at a later time depends on how closely they are described in the previous and subsequent contexts (Johnson, 1997). When explaining how we arrived at our findings, the most we can do is explain how we arrived at our results (Merriam, 2002). This study established external validity through an interview methodology based on past qualitative investigations. Additionally, each interview was scrutinized for internal consistency.

Ethical considerations were applied, and participants were explained the study objectives, period, and the risk and benefits of the study. Participants were told that they would remain anonymous and untraceable. Therefore, pseudonyms were used. It was also stressed that their involvement was voluntary and that the data was solely accessible to the lead researcher and his research team. Name, age, sex, educational qualification, occupation, type of marriage, duration of the marriage, and the number of children were all collected using the participant information survey. Couples were contacted for semi-structured interviews, including both open-ended and probing questions. Each audio-taped interview lasted for approximately two hours. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and examined, discussing themes using the thematic analysis approach. When transcribing, the audio recording was replayed several times to transcribe participants' responses. Since the participants were all educated, interviews were conducted in English. The researchers began by gaining a broad understanding of transcripts. Similarly, critical statements about the participant's experience were identified as formulating meanings of the introductory statements. Further, we removed overlapping statements and grouped these statements into clusters. Consensus and further discussion were used to settle any remaining theme disagreements. The confidentiality of the participants was ensured by changing all identifying data.

The researchers established the themes, essential codes, and categories separately. Each illustrative quote was coded independently. Creating categories was an interpretative process in which definitions were constantly compared. The categories were formed using prior research. Finally, the team used cross-analysis to define and finalize the codes, categories, and central themes.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

As a general rule, when people think of intimacy, they picture sexual intimacy or intimacy that exists only within romantic partnerships. It is essential to pay attention to what people say to get a sense of what is meant by intimacy in a close relationship. Even though the sample size was small, there was a high degree of homogeneity in developing themes. Participants in their interviews described five types of intimacy: (a) Emotional Intimacy (connectedness), (b) Social Intimacy (social bonding), (c) Intellectual Intimacy (shared idea and support), (d) Sexual Intimacy (physical and non-physical), (e) Recreational Intimacy (bonding through activities of fun and enjoyment). These themes and categories were consistent with previous research. Participants also stated their positive experiences of intimacy.

Emotional Intimacy (Feeling of closeness)

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The participants in the study used the terms such as mutual bonding and support, closeness, understanding, sharing, and connectedness to describe emotional intimacy. These accounts of closeness on an emotional level illustrate how partners can rely on and learn from one another's company, love, care, and support, have open communication, and seek mutual understanding. Most participants reported that it is essential to have emotional intimacy in a marriage relationship. Various narratives of the participants described emotional intimacy. For example, one of the participants in this study shared her experience of emotional intimacy, saying that

We talk about our deepest feelings and thoughts with each other and can form a strong emotional bond. We think the best part of being with each other is being able to talk freely about our deepest, most private thoughts and feelings. (Sita, aged 45 Years, and 20 years of arranged marriage relationship).

Few other participants have also emphasized that sharing the joys and sorrows and listening to each other is essential in emotional intimacy. For instance, Nisha (28), having five years of a love marriage relationship, expressed that to be emotionally attached, one has to understand the hurts and joys of each other; you must listen to your partner when they need to talk; there must be a feeling of closeness and sharing the feelings. Further, participants viewed emotional intimacy as happiness, relaxation, satisfaction, and comfort. For instance, emotional intimacy, as experienced by one of the participants, stated that

It helps relieve some of the stress and anxiety I experience in the outside world and my blood pressure. In addition, being so physically close to her has helped boost my spirits. For some reason, being possessive of her makes me feel like I truly belong somewhere. (Sujan, aged 35 years, 6 years of arranged marriage relationship).

Likewise, when the same question was put forward to another participant Ajay (44), a teacher by profession having 16 years of arranged marriage relationship with two children, shared emotional intimacy as love and affection and cared for each other as stated that I think it is simply a way of life, our interactions with one another, feelings of love and care for one another, and so on. Similarly, another participant expressed his experience of emotional intimacy, saying that listening to and understanding each other's feelings is another crucial aspect of emotional intimacy. He further shared that

Even when we disagree, I always feel like my opinion is taken into account. When we're together, it's more than just the two of us in the same space. When I tell her about a problem, she doesn't offer solutions unless I ask her to but instead tries to empathize with how I'm feeling. Even when we're on opposite sides of an issue, it feels more like we're both trying to find a solution. We have a lot, but we always find time to hang out. That's a significant concern of ours. (Binod, aged 37 years, 7 years of arranged marriage relationship).

Additionally, another male participant reacted that

My partner and I have a friendly relationship with one another. We have decided to protect our relationship by putting an end to any conversations that could be considered disruptive. The enlightening dialogue is something that both of us have discovered via our conversations. When we are in the same room together, we showed a lot of affection for one another. When I think of the two of us, I picture two people who share a really special bond. Our interactions with one another

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appear to be endless, and we share a great deal in common. (Rakesh, aged 50 years, 27 years of arranged marriage relationship).

The perspectives of research participants visualize the idea of the feeling of closeness. Therefore, emotional intimacy is one of the essential dimensions of intimacy in a close relationship which encompasses strong bonding and mutual support; feeling of familiarity; sharing of feelings; feeling of happiness, relaxation, satisfaction, and comfort; love, affection, and care for each other; and listening to and understanding each other's feelings.

Social Intimacy (Social bonding)

According to the results of previous psychological research, social intimacy is defined as having close relationships with significant others (spouse, friends, or family) (Miller & Lefcourt, 1982). Intimacy, warmth, and open communication with others are hallmarks of this experience (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Timmerman, 1991). Another central theme from the analysis was the social intimacy dimension of marriage relationships. Most participants in the present study highlighted that social bonding is essential to maintaining social intimacy. For example, Mahesh (46), who works in the bank and has 20 years of an arranged marriage relationship, shared that during vacations, we spend time with other couples but have very few common friends.

The participant underscores the value of spending time with other couples. The results revealed that although couples enjoy spending time, they have very few friends in common. This is because couples limit their time with only a few known friends. Similar to emotional intimacy, different study participants have also described social intimacy differently. For example, Arati (33) who has 10 years of arranged marriage relationship, stated that social intimacy does not only mean time spent with other couples in a close circle but also the spouse's relationship with the in-laws.

In addition, Kamala (29), who works in the customer service department of a bank with seven years of arranged marriage, stated that social intimacy is the bonding with others, mainly family, significant others, and friends. Moreover, another participant shared his experience of social intimacy as

We regularly go for an evening walk; it is not necessary that only females need to prepare dinner; we do it together. So, it is all about doing things together in life. As a result, couples in this study defined social intimacy as encompassing more than just spending time with friends; it also includes bonding with family and in-laws and doing things together in life and sharing work. (Hari, aged 29 years, 5 years of love marriage).

Likewise, another participant related his experience of social intimacy as

Commonly, we just hang out by ourselves. We enjoy having fun as a group. Sharing experiences with our close circle of friends is a priority for us. My partner and me share many mutual friends. There is no one who, when in the company of their significant other, makes me happier than my spouse and me. A lot of our mutual friends are in common with each other. My current romantic commitment is satisfying all of my requirements. It seems we have much in common for a meaningful conversation. (Govinda, aged 35 years, 16 years of arranged marriage relationship).

Sexual Intimacy (Physical and non-physical)

A description of the participants' intimate sex experiences has been provided. Personal sexual conversation, sexually expressive excitement, and a strong desire for sex are some of the themes that emerge when considering these concepts. People who participated in the study defined sexual intimacy as a connection based on shared physical experiences beyond sex. It entails both verbal and physical expressions of love. One of the female participants narrated her experience of sexual intimacy as

In our relationship, sexual intimacy doesn't only mean having sexual intercourse. Sexual intimacy for us also involves physical affection such as touching, kissing and holding each other. Overall, I am satisfied with my sex life, and we have an intimate sexual conversation. (Sarita, aged 45 years, 27 years of arranged marriage relationship).

Similarly, Anjali (33), who also teaches in a college with six years of arranged marriage, defined sexual intimacy by saying that to be sexually intimate, one has to be sexually expressive. Sexual expression is an essential part of our relationship. Likewise, Prem (38), associated with a commercial bank having two children with an arranged marriage of 15 years, reported that sexual desires and excitement are essential for a perfect married life. The participant further said that in our sex life, we both want to talk openly about our sexual desires and excitements, which we think is vital for our relationship to continue. Similarly, another male participant reported that

I don't believe that our sexual behaviour is merely ordinary. I am able to communicate to my partner when I am ready to have sexual intercourse. Because my partner makes me feel comfortable, I don't feel awkward when I show my sexual interest in them. It looks like my partner is interested in having sex. (Rajesh, aged 42 years, 14 years of arranged marriage relationship).

Therefore, according to the results of this study, sexual intimacy entails more than just having sex; it also includes non-sexual displays of physical affection and discussions of sexual matters.

Intellectual Intimacy (Enriching each other's mind)

What participants meant by "sharing," "discussing," "supporting," "encouraging," and "making decisions together" was elaborated upon. Most respondents identified shared ideas and mutual support as central components of intellectual closeness. Supporting each other's career and education, planning for the future, sharing professional experiences, and being supportive of one another are all examples of how a married couple expresses their shared ideas and support for one another. For instance, Sushil, 34, who works in finance, said he and his wife talk about how they're both limited by money but want to follow their dreams. An example of sharing ideas related to his profession was provided by Puja (34), who also works in the financial sector said:

We talk about everything I do, from assignments to upcoming events. He also tells me everything about his professional life, including his plans, company advancement, and office politics. As luck would have it, I also possess the level of knowledge necessary to comprehend his line of work and his intended future achievements.

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In addition, husbands took on some household chores so their wives could work or handle work-related stress. For example, one of the female participants who teaches in a private school stated that:

Since I do all the housework, my husband has started helping out in the kitchen because he knows I can't stand spending too much time there. Because he knows I've been working too hard, he's begun helping out in the kitchen. (Mamata, aged 31 years).

Couples who are open with one another and encourage one another to pursue their interests and dreams are more likely to succeed in all the areas of life that matter most to them as a unit. If that weren't the case, the connection between us would suffer. Being at ease with one another, appreciating, respecting, communicating openly, and accepting one another will flourish in relationships where this factor is present. Participants in this study also viewed intellectual intimacy as clarification of thoughts, change in the predisposition of ideas, and learning from each other that generally indicate enriching each other's minds. For example, one of the female participants shared that

We frequently debate the matters of our children's future. We insist our child pursue the right career in the future. However, neither of us feels we are right. Instead, we enjoy listening to one another's rationale. This, I believe, helps in clarifying each other's thoughts. (Nilima, aged 42 years, 20 years of arranged marriage relationship).

Similarly, Roshan (50), a teacher by profession in a government school having arranged marriage relationships of 20 years, stated that sometimes I keep making false arguments. Still, I can change my thoughts and ideas with my partner's support. Likewise, a female participant reported that

Both of us enjoy reading books. We usually read the same book, and after we finish reading it, we discuss it. We are eager to compare the takeaways instead of telling one another what the author meant. (Shanti, aged 36 years).

Therefore, participants in this study defined intellectual intimacy as going beyond physical and emotional connection to things like talking, discussing, supporting, encouraging, making decisions together, sharing ideas and support, clarifying thoughts, shifting the disposition of ideas, and learning from one another.

Recreational Intimacy (Bonding through activities of fun and enjoyment)

Recreational intimacy was viewed as spending time together, sharing interests, and doing things together. This indicated that couples look for bonding through activities of fun and enjoyment. Further, the analysis explored spending time with a spouse through activities and events within which entertainment, fun, spending time together, and involvement in activities also encompass recreational intimacy. For instance, one of the male participants of the study reported his experience of recreational intimacy, saying that

Couples who spend time together are more likely to feel connected to one another. I have fun with my spouse even when I am not doing anything exciting, and I enjoy doing many of the same things. (Bimal, aged 40 years, 12 years of arranged marriage relationship).

Similarly, Renu (38), a teacher in a private school with 14 years long arranged marriage relationships, added that my spouse and I pursue hobbies or

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interests that we share to further bond and connect. When this element is absent from a relationship, it might become tedious. Likewise, another male participant who works as an operation head of a development bank reported that

We find those things we like to do and do them with our partners.

We sometimes walk together, make dinner, go to the cinema, and hike a mountain. This allows us to spend time together actively.

(Sanju, aged 32 years, 10 years of arranged marriage relationship).

Hence, the analysis revealed that bonding through activities of fun and enjoyment, actively spending time together, sharing interests and hobbies, and doing things together is essential to maintaining recreational intimacy.

DISCUSSION

The five dimensions of intimacy in close relationships such as emotional intimacy (feeling of closeness); social intimacy (social bonding); sexual intimacy (physical and non-physical); intellectual intimacy (enriching each other's mind), and recreational intimacy (bonding through activities of fun and enjoyment) emerged as the major themes and captured how participants relate intimacy in their daily lives as couples.

The current study found that Nepali married couples experienced emotional intimacy as bonding and mutual support, sharing of feelings and closeness, feeling of happiness, relaxation, satisfaction and comfort, interactions and feeling of love and care, and listening and understanding each other's feelings which is in line with the findings of Sandhya (2009), who revealed that married Indian couples experienced intimacy and supported their description of emotional intimacy in the present study. The current study also revealed that the feeling of closeness was a significant factor in successful emotional intimacy, as demonstrated by prior studies (Netting, 2010; Mazlomi et al., 2012; Etimadi et al., 2014). Further, the findings were consistent with those of Kamali et al., (2020), who discovered that compatibility and connection between husband and wife increase intimacy in Iranian couples.

Similarly, the findings also revealed Nepali married couples experienced social intimacy as bonding with other couples, in-laws, family and significant others having familiar friends and spending time together with other couples, which is consistent with the results of Milek et al. (2015) and Yellig (2011), who concluded that couples who spend time together with family, friends and in-laws are more likely to feel connected to one another. Moreover, previous findings by (Ghalami et al., 2013; Ferreira et al., 2013) revealed that couples with friends are closer to one another also confirms the present findings. Furthermore, recent empirical research demonstrates that intimacy is built on the foundation of shared work (Kobra et al., 2018). Couples that regularly engage in shared work report more excellent sentiments of closeness and acceptance from one another and more satisfaction with their overall relationships (Palit, 2013). When a person's social circle (family, friends and significant others) backs their relationship, they are more likely to demonstrate affection and stick with their partner (Sinclair et al., 2015), which is also supported by the present study.

As with the prior dimension, participants' accounts of their sexual intimacy activities and communications in the current study suggested that these

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were common occurrences. According to early marital literature, there was sexual activity and sexual exchange in Indian marriages (Kulkarni, 2004). This study confirms previous research linking sexual intimacy to the intimate sexual conversation, physical and non-physical sexual expression, and sexual desires and excitement (Bagarozzi, 2001). Similarly, the present study also found that couples experienced recreational intimacy as spending time together, sharing of interests, and doing things together, which is in line with the findings of Bagarozzi (2001). This showed that the couple's recreational intimacy is strengthened through activities of fun and enjoyment. Finally, the study also found that couples experienced intellectual intimacy as sharing ideas and support, sharing work, clarifying thoughts, changing predisposed ideas, and learning from each other, which corroborates the findings of Bagarozzi (2001), Oulia et al. (2006) and Bahrami et al. (2009).

CONCLUSION

The present study explored the lived experience of marital intimacy in couple's marriage relationship. The findings of this study further suggest that emotional, social, sexual, intellectual and recreational aspects of couple intimacy may also play a role in relationship satisfaction. The study's findings, however, revealed that couples who engaged in more emotional and recreational forms of intimacy reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction. By delving into the intimate experiences of Nepali married couples, this study adds to the growing body of literature on the topic. The results of this study are consistent with the theoretical assumptions made by Bowen's family system theory. These results will serve as a foundation for further studies that can deeply examine any facets of marital intimacy. In the future, researchers should consider contrasting the intimate experiences of couples who have been married for a short time and those who have been married for a long time along each dimension of intimacy. Additional research in this area should evaluate the intimate experiences of couples from various socio-economic backgrounds and educational levels.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data supporting this study's findings are available on request from the corresponding author.

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