

Exploring the Marital Challenges of Men with Fluency Disorders: A Qualitative Study

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Original Article

Abstract

Introduction: Stuttering disorder is a common developmental disability whose prevalence is estimated at 1% (68 million people) worldwide and between 0.85% and 1.35% in Iran. Due to its nature, people suffering from this disorder experience many problems not only psychologically but also in social relations, and they need attention in this field. Therefore, the present study aimed to explore the challenges men who stutter face at the time of marriage.

Materials and Methods: This qualitative study used thematic analysis. The samples were selected by the convenience non-random method. The data reached saturation with 11 men with stuttering on the eve of marriage. To collect data, a semi-structured interview method was used, and all participants were interviewed in person. To analyze the data, the recorded interviews were transcribed and classified using MAXQDA software.

Results: The average age of the participants was 25.27 years [standard deviation (SD) = 5.53]. Content analysis of the interviews yielded 431 open codes, comprising 41 primary codes, 19 mother codes, and 7 selective codes. The selective codes obtained from the content analysis of 11 texts were: inability to express oneself, fear of being humiliated and ridiculed, feeling of inadequacy, fear of losing others, worry about future marital relationship, worry about future career, hereditary transmission, and psychological problems caused by stuttering.

Conclusion: The results of this research indicated that to reduce the fears and worries of people with stuttering about marriage, it is necessary to correct their cognitions, reduce their cognitive errors (fear of humiliation, feeling of inadequacy, fear of loss), and provide psychological and skill training (life skills and effective communication skills) in line with the fears obtained from content analysis along with speech therapy.

Keywords: Stuttering disorder; Marriage; Qualitative study

Citation: Sabouri F, Namdarpoor F, Shafiei B. **Exploring the Marital Challenges of Men with Fluency Disorders: A Qualitative Study.** J Res Rehabil Sci 2023; 19: 27-34.

Received date: 30.01.2023

Accept date: 11.03.2023

Published: 04.04.2023

Introduction

Stuttering is a communication disorder characterized by involuntary repetition or prolongation of sounds, syllables, or words, and by involuntary hesitations or pauses that disrupt the fluent, rhythmic flow of speech (1). Stuttering is a common developmental disability, with an estimated global prevalence of 1% (68 million people). Precise statistics on the prevalence of

stuttering in Iran are not available, but based on limited studies, the rate is approximately similar to global rates, ranging from 0.85% to 1.35% (2). Numerous negative consequences are associated with stuttering disorder, beginning in childhood. These consequences include social, academic, and emotional problems such as peer rejection and lack of positive peer relationships, increased risk of bullying, reduced

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success in activities, and concerns about stress and mental health (3). Stuttering disorder in adults can cause problems in social participation and life opportunities, severely restricting them (1). The impact of stuttering extends beyond perception, knowledge, and negative attitudes toward speech (4); research has also shown that people who stutter experience difficulties in emotional, behavioral, and cognitive reactions, communication, quality of life, and social interaction (5). Therefore, stuttering harms an individual's overall well-being, reducing emotional, social, and psychological well-being and potentially increasing the risk of a poorer quality of life in adults who stutter (6). Life experience and experimental studies have shown that people who stutter often feel embarrassment, shame, depression, difficulty communicating, and dissatisfaction with life, and as a result, they face many problems in communication and social life; overall, their quality of life is reduced in many aspects (7-9).

One of the most important phenomena affected by stuttering is the fear of marriage in people who stutter (10). Marriage is one of the most important events in social life, which greatly influences an individual's future (11). Marriage, as the first step in forming the family institution, means the merging of two perspectives, two histories, values, and different worldviews. In fact, marriage is the first and most important stage in the family life cycle (12), in which a spouse is chosen, and success in other stages of life depends on it (13). Family, economic, and social issues have accompanied and delayed the marriage of young people with fear and anxiety (14). Fear of marriage (Gamophobia) is an emotional reaction that encompasses the anticipation of psychological harm, vulnerability to danger, or an individual's expectation of their ability to cope with marital life situations (15). Worldwide, there are many men and women who, due to fear of marriage, do not take on the responsibility of marriage and remain single for life (16). Some individuals who stutter consider themselves to have a defect (17) and, because of this, lose control over their conditions and their own lives, thus experiencing impairment in managing their occupational, family, and social affairs. Some of these individuals, due to speech difficulties, believe they cannot work in every job and consider themselves weak in activities that require talking with others (18), consequently limiting their choices to specific conditions.

Regarding marriage, some of these individuals either do not marry at all or insist on marrying people who either have a defect or are inferior to them in other criteria (19). Not much research has been conducted on

the issues and problems of marriage for people who stutter (20,23). It seems that for people who stutter, marriage is a fundamental concern (20). Previous studies have shown that stuttering is an obstacle to forming relationships, and speaking with the opposite sex is often difficult for people who stutter (21, 24), to the extent that they lack opportunities for successful long-term romantic relationships (25). Scott (26) also believes that adults who stutter may face challenges in their marriages. Speech therapists provide common treatments for stuttering and primarily focus on language and fluency issues in people who stutter. However, individuals who stutter suffer not only from overt symptoms but also from covert symptoms of stuttering, including negative attitudes (fear, anger, anxiety, hatred, etc.) and speech and situational avoidances, which are factors limiting communication and the attainment of social, educational, and occupational opportunities (27). Speech therapy for adults who stutter encompasses two general approaches: one, known as stuttering modification, addresses stuttering by reducing avoidance, desensitization, gradual modification of stuttering behavior, and changing feelings, emphasizing fluent speech as a direct goal.

In contrast, the second approach, called fluency shaping, uses behavioral principles to create speech free from stuttering and pays less attention to the accompanying feelings and attitudes. Recently, a third speech therapy approach, integrating stuttering modification and fluency shaping, has been introduced (28). There is disagreement regarding the criteria for satisfactory treatment of stuttering (16). Therefore, it is understandable that researchers, practitioners, and individuals who stutter look beyond speech therapy to alternative treatments (28). On the other hand, since culture plays a major role in how society interacts with people who stutter, the expectations placed on them, and their fears and worries, it is expected that the concerns and preoccupations of people who stutter will differ across cultures. For this reason, a complete and comprehensive understanding of the concerns, grounded in the lived experiences of people who stutter and appropriate to Iran's culture, seems essential. The present study aimed to qualitatively investigate the problems faced by adult men who stutter on the verge of marriage, presenting them from the individual's own perspective. The main importance of this research was identifying the reasons adult men who stutter avoid marriage, or the frightening factors for them in this regard, which could be used to provide solutions to reduce the marriage problems of men who stutter, appropriate to the culture of Iran.

Materials and Methods

The present study was a qualitative investigation aimed at identifying the marriage problems of adult men who stutter on the verge of marriage. Thematic analysis was conducted through interviews. Brown and Clarke's method (29, 30) was used for data analysis. Initially, the study reached data saturation through semi-structured interviews with 11 participants. After each interview, the text was typed word-for-word in Microsoft Word using the recorded audio, then analyzed in MAXQDA 2020. The interview began with demographic questions and, after a warm-up, continued with open-ended questions appropriate to the research objectives. The interview questions were prepared using previous research studies and preliminary conversations with people who stutter and were approved by six counseling specialists working in the field of stuttering disorders. Examples of these questions include: Do you intend to get married? What impact do you think your stuttering will have on your marriage? Whenever ambiguous points were observed in respondents' answers, they were asked to provide further explanations to ensure the interviewer's understanding of their responses was reliable.

Participants were selected through non-random convenience sampling from men who stutter on the verge of marriage who were referred to speech therapy clinics in Isfahan city. This selection was based on their file data. The inclusion criteria included being male, aged 20-35 years, having at least basic literacy, achieving a minimum score of 3 on the SSI-4 (Stuttering Severity Instrument - Fourth Edition) test, and having no record of intellectual disability or mental retardation in their medical file. Given that marriage criteria differ by age, to increase the accuracy of code extraction and data validity, participants' ages were limited to under 35 for the marriage criterion. Also, written consent was obtained from all participants regarding their voluntary participation in the research. Furthermore, individuals who at any stage were unwilling to participate in the research, had education below the secondary school level, or scored below 3 on the stuttering test were excluded from the study. In the present research, the ethical standards governing human research were observed.

Data analysis: To analyze the interview findings, each recorded interview was listened to multiple times and transcribed. Phrases and sentences were conceptualized, initial codes assigned, and they were reviewed again. Similar sentences were grouped, and in some cases, similar categories were merged. This was done to derive the main and sub-categories. To check the validity of the findings, the method of Guba and Lincoln (31) was used. In this method, findings

are examined along four axes (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability). To examine the credibility of the findings in the present study, after identifying the components, the interviewees were referred back to, and they pointed to the same categories presented. To check transferability, three other interviewees who met the aforementioned entry criteria for the research were voluntarily selected, the extracted codes were given to them, and they were asked whether this was their intended meaning; ultimately, the findings were confirmed. For the dependability evaluation, questions similar to the previous ones, but in a different form, were designed and presented to the interviewees, from whose responses the same previous categories were obtained. Finally, to assess the research's confirmability, the codings were evaluated by three other specialists in the field of stuttering disorder, who confirmed the findings.

Results

The descriptive findings, which took 2 months, show that the average age of the 11 participants was 27.25 (standard deviation = 5.53 years). Regarding education, one participant had a medical doctorate, 2 had a master's degree, 4 had a bachelor's degree, 2 had an associate degree, and 2 had a high school diploma. The average interview duration was one hour. Analysis of the 11 contents (texts) yielded a total of 431 codes in the form of 7 themes (selective codes), 19 categories (secondary codes), and 41 sub-categories (primary codes), which are detailed below. Table 1 shows the themes (selective codes), primary codes (parent codes), and secondary codes (sub-codes) along with sample interview sentences.

Inability in Assertiveness: Individuals who stutter believe that their inability to speak fluently may lead their spouse to take advantage of this limitation and portray them as being at fault in discussions or conflicts. The inability to introduce themselves during a marriage proposal ceremony, difficulty in debating and convincing others, and problems communicating with members of the spouse's family were among the concerns that individuals who stutter had regarding assertiveness in marital life.

Fear of Humiliation and Mockery: Individuals who stutter believed that others, including their spouse, might ridicule them because of their speech. They felt they would not be as quick as others at performing tasks and would be unable to keep up with their peers due to stuttering. They also believed that their spouse, their spouse's family, and even their future children might feel embarrassed by their manner of speaking in front of others and might humiliate them in different situations.

Table 1. Themes (selective codes), primary codes (parent codes), and secondary codes (sub-codes) along with sample interview sentences

Theme (Selective Code)	Category (Secondary Code)	Sub-category (Initial Code)	Meaning Unit (Content)
Inability to be assertive	Inability to communicate (75 codes in 11 texts)	Spouse's (future) abuse of the stuttering person's inability to speak and blaming them (2 sentences in 2 texts)	- By the time I gather myself, they will have "washed me away," so to speak, and I am completely afraid to state my defenses.
		Inability to speak and introduce oneself in a courtship/proposal ceremony (12 sentences in 8 texts)	- Normally, even people who do not stutter might get tongue-tied depending on their stress level. Stuttering worsens under stress, and it surely does in a proposal ceremony.
		Inability to argue and convince people (22 sentences in 9 texts)	- A discussion might come up somewhere, and because of my stuttering, I might not be able to speak well in front of my spouse and my spouse's family, and this could be misunderstood as "aha, they cannot defend themselves."
		Inability to speak with people (32 sentences in 11 texts)	- When you want to express something, at that moment you are unable to say that word and are forced to use another word so you can express it without stuttering.
Fear of being humiliated and mocked	Being teased by others and spouse (future) (32 codes in 11 texts)	Being belittled by others because of stuttering (13 codes from 7 texts)	- For example, being mocked right from the beginning. I feel the mocking would be very intense.
		Being mocked by the spouse (future) because of stuttering (17 codes from 11 texts)	- First learn how to speak, then express your opinion.
	Being compared with others (34 codes in 11 texts)	Inability to advance in career compared to peers because of stuttering (6 sentences in 4 texts)	- You might not be able to have many career advancements because of stuttering, and your friends might get promoted while you still cannot.
		Not being as fast as others in tasks (8 sentences in 6 texts)	- Because talking to a person who stutters requires its own patience, and this can be problematic. We have to explain for an hour; this becomes boring for them. Maybe the first or second question is not boring, but after that, it is.
	Shame and embarrassment due to stuttering (37 codes in 9 texts)	Shame and embarrassment of the spouse's family due to the person's stuttering (4 codes from 4 texts)	- Another fear of mine is that my spouse's family will be embarrassed by me and the way I speak, and will not want me to interact much with their relatives, and will indirectly arrange things so I am not in the spotlight much.
		Child's shame and embarrassment due to their father's or mother's stuttering (4 codes from 3 texts)	- Furthermore, in the future, your spouse might come to terms with your speaking, but a child does not have this understanding. In the future, at school, family gatherings, and even friendly gatherings where a father's presence is needed, it might cause the child to feel ashamed, and, naturally, it has an effect on their morale.
		Spouse's (future) shame and embarrassment due to the person's stuttering (19 codes from 9 texts)	- One of the existing problems is that in gatherings and parties, this stuttering causes embarrassment for my spouse and me.
		Shame experienced by the person themselves (6 codes from 6 texts)	- Then, for example, when we are invited to a gathering for the first time, I myself might be afraid and prefer not to go to that gathering, and feel embarrassed.

Feelings of Inadequacy: Individuals who stutter believed that because of their speech problem, they are highly limited both in choosing a spouse and in being chosen by women. They feared that if they developed feelings for someone, they might not be chosen because of their stutter. Not being taken seriously by a spouse, feelings of personal inadequacy, and low self-esteem due to stuttering were other concerns that troubled individuals who stutter about marriage. They also believed that their spouse might not take them seriously because of their inability to articulate words fluently.

Fear of Losing Others: Individuals who stutter feared being rejected either by their spouse or by the spouse's family. They believed that their manner of speaking might eventually become irritating to their spouse, to the point that the spouse would no longer wish to communicate with them.

Concerns about Marital Relationships: Individuals who stutter fear not being understood by their spouse or the spouse's family. The inability to defend themselves or support their spouse, and fear of their spouse committing infidelity because of their stutter, were among the other sources of anxiety related to marriage. They were also concerned that, due to their speech difficulty, they might not be able to communicate events accurately and promptly to their spouse and might therefore be accused of secrecy or lack of transparency.

Hereditary Transmission and Psychological Problems: They were deeply concerned about passing their stutter on to their children, either genetically or through learning and imitation. The possibility of developing psychological problems such as depression and stress was another concern reported by individuals who stutter.

Concerns About Future Career: Individuals who stutter perceived themselves as unable to perform daily tasks effectively because of their speech. They feared that, due to speech difficulties, they might not be able to obtain a suitable job or advance in their careers as much as others. As a result, they worried that financial issues and their occupational status could threaten their future marriage.

Discussion

The present study aimed to explain the personal views of adult men who stutter regarding barriers to marriage. The results showed that 7 selective codes, 19 axial codes, and 41 initial codes were extracted from the analysis of 11 interview transcripts. The selective codes obtained from the content analysis included: inability to assert oneself, fear of humiliation

and ridicule, feelings of inadequacy, fear of losing others, concerns about future marital relationships, concerns about future career, hereditary transmission, and psychological problems related to stuttering. These results were consistent with previous studies (4, 10, 17, 18).

The findings indicate that men who stutter experience difficulties in expressing themselves and communicating their needs. They fear that, because of their stutter, they may be unable to defend themselves when necessary or to persuade the other party—often their spouse—in discussions. Limitations in word selection due to pronunciation difficulties may cause them to appear incomplete or incapable in two-sided or group discussions. Individuals who stutter fear being mocked by their spouse, the spouse's family, or others close to them, and they worry that their weaker verbal abilities may be exploited as a point of vulnerability.

Moreover, these individuals often experience feelings of inadequacy due to perceived speech deficiencies and the belief that they cannot compete with others, especially in verbal communication. They frequently fear abandonment by close individuals, especially their spouse, and tend to view the world as an insecure place. They believe that stuttering may damage their marital relationship and that their spouse might gradually distance themselves because they are not as fluent in speaking as others. Individuals who stutter also feel that their lack of verbal fluency limits their success in the workplace and prevents them from performing many jobs, pushing them toward occupations that require minimal verbal communication. Another major concern is the fear of genetically transmitting stuttering to the next generation or of children learning the behavior from them.

To interpret these findings, it should be noted that individuals who stutter constitute a portion of society, and although stuttering is primarily an expressive language disorder, it is accompanied by psychological challenges. Therefore, preventive and therapeutic approaches that ignore psychological aspects are unlikely to be successful (34). The findings also show that many fears and attitudes of individuals who stutter about marriage stem from misconceptions about interpersonal relationships and irrational views about marital relationships—for example, incomplete expression of emotions during emotional or sexual relationships, remaining silent or giving in during disagreements because of stuttering, feelings of shame and embarrassment about stuttering, and fear of spousal infidelity due to the speech disorder.

It should be emphasized that many of these fears may also occur among individuals without stuttering

who are approaching marriage; individuals who stutter may simply experience them more intensely due to their speech difficulties. Understanding this may help them avoid viewing themselves as exceptional cases and instead adopt more logical perspectives. Emotional and sexual intimacy in marriage does not depend solely on verbal skills at the moment of interaction; rather, a significant part of marital relationships relies on behavioral skills and the practical expression of affection throughout the relationship. Recognizing this may strengthen their commitment to building a relationship and help them view the situation as more controllable than they initially believed (11).

Becoming familiar with dysfunctional thoughts can also help individuals who stutter realize that such thoughts may be irrational or simply unhelpful. A dysfunctional thought has two criteria: it is either irrational or unhelpful. Therefore, even thoughts that appear logical—such as “I cannot attract others through speaking like other men”—may still be dysfunctional if they are not useful and do not lead to positive outcomes. Encouraging individuals to replace such thoughts with healthier ones can be crucial for their success (35).

Considering the identified fears and concerns of young men who stutter regarding marriage, designing a pre-marital educational program specifically for men with stuttering could reduce anxiety and fears related to starting married life.

Some fears among individuals who stutter—such as fear of verbal or physical aggression or the inability to speak during marriage proposal ceremonies—are more specific to this population. This study specifically identified such fears, including the possibility that a spouse might exploit their speech difficulties during conflicts, embarrassment of the spouse or the spouse's family due to the individual's stutter, and the possibility of infidelity due to limitations in career advancement and social relations caused by stuttering.

Training in anger-management skills and, when necessary, referral to a psychiatrist for medication may be important for prevention and treatment. Teaching fundamental life skills—an important goal of health systems worldwide—plays a greater role than stuttering in controlling aggression and in expressing emotions appropriately (34). Therefore, individuals who stutter particularly need education in basic life skills such as anger management and assertiveness. With such training, individuals can learn to engage in problem-solving rather than resort to aggressive behavior and to express their feelings assertively when

necessary. Recognizing emotions, learning problem-solving, assertiveness, and conflict-resolution skills are particularly valuable for individuals who stutter.

Providing accurate information about the genetic basis of stuttering may also help reduce fears related to hereditary transmission. Some fears, such as fear of rejection or ridicule, may stem from deeper underlying factors such as maladaptive schemas (33). When designing a premarital educational package for men who stutter, training and skill-building interventions addressing the fears identified in interviews should be included, tailored specifically to the problems experienced by Iranian men who stutter before marriage.

Although addressing these fears is not easy, examining their roots and increasing individuals' awareness can improve their understanding of the issue. Individuals who stutter often worry about their career futures; deeper analysis of their statements shows that anxiety about becoming stuck while speaking at work and about appearing foolish to clients or employers contributes to negative feelings about their occupational futures. This concern can significantly affect their marriage prospects and financial stability.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), schema-based therapies, and educational approaches can be effective in improving attitudes and irrational thoughts in this area. Psychotherapy can guide individuals to commit to changing aspects of their lives that cause distress and help them accept their limitations until improvements in speech occur. Education about concepts such as control and commitment—key principles in ACT—can also help individuals face their fears more effectively.

Limitations

This study was conducted only among men who stutter living in Isfahan. Finding participants and obtaining their consent to participate in the study was very difficult. Additionally, because the research involved long interviews, participants often became fatigued. Another important limitation was the lack of purposive or snowball sampling, which is typically used in qualitative research. Therefore, some information-rich individuals may not have been included in the study, and the findings should be interpreted with caution.

Recommendations

It is recommended that future research consider possible differences in fears across genders and conduct similar studies among women who stutter, in

wider geographical areas, or among individuals aged 35 or older.

Conclusion

The results of this study showed that adult men who stutter experience fears and concerns regarding marriage that are either uncommon among the general population of men approaching marriage—such as difficulty with assertiveness, fear of ridicule, hereditary transmission of the disorder, and feelings of inadequacy—or, if present among the general population, are more pronounced in individuals who stutter. These attitudes may contribute to or intensify psychological problems and negatively affect their personal lives after marriage.

Therefore, reducing the fears and concerns of individuals who stutter regarding marriage requires correcting cognitive distortions and replacing dysfunctional thoughts with more realistic ones, along with psychological education and life-skills training alongside speech therapy.

Acknowledgments

The present study is a part of the doctoral thesis of the first author of this article with the code of ethics IR.IAU.KHSH.REC.1401.022 approved at the Islamic Azad University of Khomeini Shahr. In this way, the authors are grateful to the Islamic Azad University, Khomeini Shahr branch and all the respected contributors who put their time in advancing the goals of this article.

Authors' Contribution

Study design and conception: Farhad Sabouri

Attracting financial resources to carry out the study: Farhad Sabouri

Support and executive and scientific services of the study: Fahimeh Namdarpour, Bijan Shafiei

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Analysis and interpretation of the results: Farhad Sabouri, Fahimeh Namdarpour, Bijan Shafiei

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Responsibility for maintaining the integrity of the process of conducting the study from the beginning to the publication and responding to the opinions of the referees: Farhad Sabouri, Fahimeh Namdarpour, Bijan Shafiei

Funding

This study is based on the secondary analysis of the information extracted from the doctoral thesis of Islamic Azad University, Khomeinishahr Branch, (registration code 1884846897592351400162544850 and code of ethics IR.IAU.KHSH.REC.1401.022) and without financial support. Islamic Azad University of Khomeinishahr Branch has no opinion in collecting data, analyzing and reporting them, preparing the manuscript and final approval of the article for publication.

Conflict of Interest

The authors did not have a conflict of interest.

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