The Consequences of Distance in Relationships between Couples and Strategies to Deal with it

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1- Introduction

Considering that the foundation of relationships within a family is the couple's relationship, the present study tries to investigate one of the aspects of marital interactions, namely, “distance”, and assess the consequences and strategies to deal with it based on the standpoint of the study’s subjects.

Simmel (1903) has introduced the concept of distance in sociology of position and social distance as the fourth important factor in social position and defined it as feeling close to or far from people with whom we have a relationship (cited in Frisbee, 2007).

In fact, as Simmel (1903) says, all social interactions can be graded based on a scale measuring how close or far people are from each other. This concept assumes that there is a gap between couples which influences the quality of social interaction, brings certain consequences, and to which people react in different ways.

Therefore, the present study aims to assess, describe, and document consequences and strategies of couples who experience distance in their relationship. In-depth interviews have been conducted in order to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. Understanding the consequences of distance.
2. Documenting strategies to deal with the distance.

2- Theoretical Framework

Distance, has been considered both as a feature and quality of relationship, and as the process of maintaining the relationship (Hess, 2002). The former, considers distance as the opposite of intimacy (or closeness). In this definition, distance and closeness are two opposite poles of a continuum and distance is defined as the absence of closeness or intimacy (Lavee & Ben-Ari, 2007).

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Rosen Baum (1988) when commenting on the Conig Theory in his analysis, defines family as a particular group in which intimacy is one of its essential, inseparable, and differentiating characteristics (Rosen Baum, 1988). Among analyses that are implicitly related to this definition, Mark Knapp’s (1992) analysis can be taken into consideration. He has provided an in-depth analysis from the initial stages, testing, and disappearance of a relationship and a variety of communication process related to them which makes each stage different from the rest. Mark Knapp’s (1992) generally breaks down a relationship into ten stages, five of which is related to connection and the rest to separation (cited in Farhangi, 2000). Promise stage until complete separation includes the following five stages: differentiating, limiting, becoming soulless, avoiding each other, and separation. Another theory from which the concept of distance can indirectly be derived from, is the micro order theory which has been developed by Chalabi (1996). According to this theory, individual and interaction are the two elements which build the society at the micro level. Interaction has two major aspects: instrumental and declarative. Through declarative interaction, “we” or societies or social groups are shaped (Chalabi, 1996).

In order to maintain “we”, and consequently maintain interactive patterns, the micro social system faces substantive challenges at least in four dimensions, which include: 1) mutualcollaboration (L); 2) mutualpace (G); 3) mutualempathy (I); and 4) mutualprosperity (A). Any social group (in this case family) faces these four challenges. If a group, or a “we”, were able to solve these four challenges, we can say it has order and the order is balanced and stable. However, if these four challenges exist, the group loses its order and balance and gets impaired. But the point that is more relevant to the distance between spouses in this theory, is mutual empathy and sense of belonging, the lack of which causes problems in the association aspect of the family.

3- Methodology
The present study is qualitative; which means that it adopts a certain logic in order to investigate quality, meaning, context, or perception of actors with respect to a particular issue. To this end, using a qualitative method with forty-three couples from Tehran who were willing to participate in research, in-depth interviews were conducted and the experiences of men and women in terms of distances, consequences, and methods of dealing with it were assessed according to the obtained data. After conducting the interviews, in order to identify and examine the main topics of research (consequences and strategies to deal with distance), data-coding and analysis were performed. The necessary information for this study was obtained using in-depth interviews and empathic discussions. These interviews were conducted in a semi-structured fashion and aimed to comprehend the participants’ experiences in their own words.
4- Results and Discussion
In the present study, consequences mean the impact of distance between spouses. Different types of distances produce different consequences. These consequences have been broadly classified in two groups: positive and negative. Individuals were subjected to negative consequences of conflict-based and position-based distances while marital relationships were only subjected to negative consequence of choice-based distance (conflict). Also, positive consequences were due to choice-based and position-based distances, respectively.

Negative consequences of distance include: feelings of loneliness, relative feelings of deprivation, lack of happiness, domestic violence, family concerns regarding marriage of their children, sexual dissatisfaction, and marital conflict. Among the listed items, the only negative consequence of choice-based distance, was marital conflict.

Self-assessment, strengthening the relationship, freedom and mobility, skills and self-reliance, are the positive consequences of choice-based and position-based distances.

One of the very important aspects that emerged in the experiences of participants, was “strategies”. In the present study, strategy has been defined as guidelines created by actors in order to control, manage, and deal with distance. This research shows that men and women utilize different methods to deal with distance, and these methods are categorized in three groups, according to the role they play to maintain or end the relationship: maintaining and improving the relationship, being indifferent toward the relationship, and ending the relationship.

Strategies that are used to maintain and improve relationships, include continuing education, efforts to improve irrational beliefs, marriage counseling, adaptation, openness, and alternative relationships.

Indifference toward the relationship was seen in the form of reactions such as submission to the conditions and fatalism, the belief in the immutability of spouses, spirituality, continuing education, making new connections, and relationships outside the family. However, some of these strategies, while being indifferent toward marital relationships, help spouses to recover and improve their personal lives. Continuing education and creating new connections belong to this category of strategies.

The decision to divorce and living independently, are two of the strategies that aim to end the relationship.

5- Suggestions
The differences and similarities of the adopted tactics clearly indicate the complexity and the need to manage the relationship. Therefore, there should be public education and support for such matters. Also, it must be understood that mankind needs to satisfy his/her needs, some of which are vital and inevitable, and also that there are similarities and differences between men and women; once these
are understood, marital satisfaction can improve. To this end, focus on identification of gender differences in different behavior patterns in education programs before marriage, is suggested. It is necessary to point out that in relationships with detrimental types of distances, promoting a culture of consultation in order to conduct early intervention in case of a problem, will have a very effective role in prevention and treatment.

**Key words:** Distance, Distancing, Consequence, Strategy.

**References**


