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# Forty years on one pillow: an examination of long-term marital dynamics

Zeliha Kumbar Pala<sup>1\*</sup> and Çiğdem Yavuz Güler<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

In this study, the views of individuals who have been married for a long period of time on their marital life were analyzed. The research was conducted with 14 individuals whose marriage duration ranged between 15 and 31. The research data were obtained from semistructured interviews with the participants. In the interviews, 23 questions were asked about demographic information, marital status and thoughts. The interviews lasted approximately 40–50 min. The data obtained from the interviews were content analyzed. In line with the views of the participants, the answers were classified into six main categories. These categories are as follows: sense of being a family and togetherness; communication; emotional dynamics; roles and responsibilities, spending time together; and boundaries. The findings show that, long-term marital dynamics indicate that spouses are satisfied with their marriage, feel safe and peaceful, and have emotional dynamics that include feelings such as respect, love, commitment, trust, gratitude, and thankfulness. Considering the relationship styles of the spouses, they were happy to spend time together and tried to fulfill their roles and responsibilities effectively.

**Keywords** Marriage, Family, Long lasting marriages

## Introduction

Marriage is defined as a lifelong commitment between two people [1]. However, marriage is more than just an emotional union; it is a social institution recognized by the state and society as a contract [2]. Some researchers describe marriage not as ‘living together’ but as a relationship that can undergo changes in meaning [3]. In other words, marriage is a contract between two people to live together, share their lives, have children, and raise them. As a system of relationships, marriage is an important and legal form of relationship that binds two

people together and is carried out under the control of the state. Marriage is an institution that affects various aspects of life, meets multifaceted needs, and shapes social life [4] stated that marriage is not a linear process that continuously improves or deteriorates, but rather a complex system that can be influenced by various factors in both positive and negative ways. Mace describes marriage as a reliable structure built on deep feelings such as love, belonging, and commitment between spouses [5]. This institution, which is renewed on basis of changing experiences and established on legitimate foundations, has undergone various changes over time, with functions such as maintaining the social structure of the society in which it exists and carrying culture and traditions into the future [6].

In this context, in a study conducted on long-term marriages involving 351 couples who had been married for 15 years or more, satisfied couples viewed marriage as a commitment, whereas unhappy couples stated that

\*Correspondence:

Zeliha Kumbar Pala  
zeliha.kumbarpala@stu.fsm.edu.tr

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Postgraduate Education, Department of Guidance and Psychological Counselling, Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakif University, Istanbul, Turkey

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Education, Department of Psychological Counselling and Guidance, Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakif University, Istanbul, Turkey



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children were the fundamental element in maintaining the relationship [1]. Other studies on marriage were conducted [7] to identify the factors that distinguish happy and unhappy marriages. Researchers have aimed to understand the dysfunctional behavior patterns of unhappy couples and to identify what makes them unhappy. These studies revealed that couples' ability to manage conflict significantly affects both the stability and quality of the relationship. To understand happiness in marriage, researchers first focused their attention on unhappy or troubled couples and compared them with satisfied couples [8]. Moreover, researchers have focused on happy marriages and sought to reveal what satisfied and married couples do when faced with conflict [9]. Another qualitative study was conducted on couples who had been married for 25 years or more in India. The findings revealed that elements such as trust, honesty, loyalty, sacrifice, and understanding form the foundation of long-term marriages [10].

The data obtained from studies in the literature show that marriage is not only about continuing the human race but also about establishing sincere relationships between women and men, achieving economic prosperity [11, 12], finding a solution to feelings of loneliness, having good living conditions, maintaining a legitimate and healthy sexual life [13] meeting strong social support needs and gaining status, and establishing a family [14]. The expectations and reasons mentioned regarding marriage can also be determinants of the marital relationship and process [15].

The qualitative research conducted [16] examines the factors contributing to successful and long-lasting marriages, presenting an analysis of marriage preparation experiences, individual qualities, and socialization processes. These findings indicate that healthy communication, personal qualities, commitment, and socialization within the family environment, which shape individuals' perceptions and expectations of marriage, are important for marital success. In a related study on the role of love in the continuity of happiness and satisfaction in marriage, communication, forgiveness, and shared values were found to be at least as important as love and affection [17]. Similarly, [18], in their study of couples who had been married for 35 years or more, reported that friendship, humor, and spending time together are important factors that support the longevity of marriage. In another study, the meaning that individuals attach to friendships during the transition to adulthood plays a decisive role in the romantic and marital relationships they will form in the future [19].

Unhappiness in marriages can lead to separation and create unhappy individuals. It is possible that happiness in a marital relationship contributes to individual happiness. The increase in divorce rates has prompted

researchers to conduct studies on marriage and marital relationships [20]. Expressing negative feelings in a constructive manner and adopting a solution-oriented approach to the problems encountered throughout marriage are extremely important factors in the longevity of marriage [21].

The aim of this study is to examine the characteristics of long-lasting marriages through individuals with functional marriages and to identify the factors that contribute to these characteristics. The aim was to identify the factors related to marriage and marital relationships among individuals whose marriages have lasted for a long period of time. The evaluations and experiences of individuals who had been married for at least 15 years and reported maintaining a satisfying relationship were examined. The findings of this study indicate that the concepts most emphasized by participants as factors contributing to long-term marriages include companionship, shared burdens, being a good friend, maintaining privacy, understanding, empathy, responsibility, and communication.

The research findings reveal the emotional, social and structural aspects of long-lasting and happy marriages. The participants defined marriage as 'sharing burdens, growing together' and 'being companions on a journey', emphasizing that respect, love, patience, empathy and mutual understanding are fundamental values in marriage. In addition, realistic and moderate expectations about marriage, starting before marriage, significantly contribute to satisfaction and continuity in marriage.

In this study, the meanings that individuals with long-term marriage experience attach to marriage, the values that stand out in the relationship, and the fundamental factors that contribute to sustainability were examined. The findings show that marriage is not only emotion-based but also a dynamic process nourished by responsibility, understanding, and patience. In this context, it is recommended that premarriage and postmarriage education programs focusing on developing communication skills, setting boundaries, and taking responsibility be widespread to contribute to the continuity and sustainability of marriage. The research results are expected to contribute to the development of content for family counseling specialists and family and couple therapy training programmes offered before or during marriage. For future research, the perspectives on the marriage of different cultural and socioeconomic groups could be examined in a comparative manner.

## Method

In this study, the phenomenological approach, a qualitative research method, was used to investigate the long-term dynamics of married individuals and to gain in-depth knowledge on the subject. This approach is used

in studies that seek to understand individuals' experiences, and the meanings they attach to these experiences [22]. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Fatih Sultan Mehmet Foundation University. A 'Personal Information Form' created by the researchers was used to obtain demographic information about the participants, and an 'Interview Form' prepared in line with the literature review to understand the long-term dynamics of marriage among married individuals was also used.

Before the interviews, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the principle of volunteering. It was explained that the data obtained from the interviews would be used solely for academic purposes. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and then transcribed. The duration of the interviews ranged from approximately 40–50 min. The data obtained were analyzed via using the MaxQDA-2024 program.

### Research group

The study group consists of married individuals with the aim of identifying the factors that determine the characteristics of long-term marriages. When selecting the study group, it was expected that participants would have been married for at least 15 years and would consider their marriage to be a happy one. Among the individuals eligible for the qualitative study, participants were first scored on the Marriage Life Scale to understand their marital satisfaction. After the general scoring of the Marriage Life Scale (MLS), participants with a total score of 40 or above were included in the study. This threshold corresponds to a high level of marital satisfaction, indicating that participants responded with "agree" or "strongly agree" to the majority of the scale items. This criterion was used to ensure that the

qualitative interviews were conducted with individuals who perceived their marriages as generally satisfying and functional.

As shown in Table 1, the participants varied in terms of characteristics such as age, occupation, and length of marriage. This study was conducted with 14 married individuals, 9 of whom were female and 5 of whom were male. The participants' ages ranged from 37 to 58 years, and their length of marriage ranged from 15 to 35 years. The majority of participants indicated that they were married through an arranged marriage. The participants had various occupations, including housewives, teachers, academics, salespersons, bakers, engineers, and accountants. This indicates that the participants had diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. The varying lengths of the participants' marriages offer diverse insights into their experiences, attitudes, and perceptions regarding the factors influencing long-term marriages.

### Data collection tools

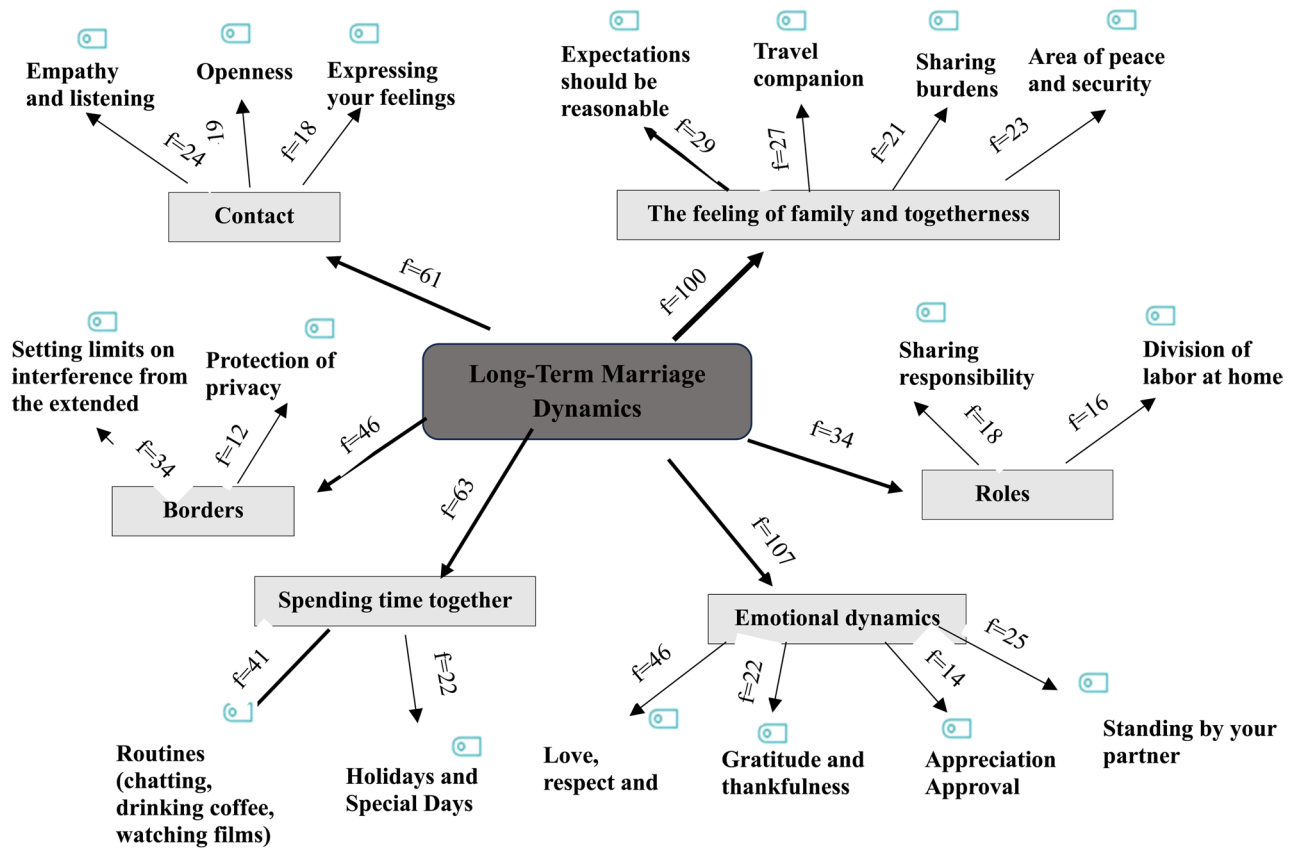
#### Marriage life scale

The Marriage Life Scale was used during the preliminary application process to determine the overall satisfaction of the individuals included in the study with their marital relationships. On the basis of the results obtained from this scale, individuals who were satisfied with their marriages were included in the study. The Marriage Life Scale (MLS; Turkish: Evlilik Yaşamı Ölçeği—EYÖ) developed by Tezer [22] was used to measure marital satisfaction [10]. It is a 5-point Likert-type scale consisting of 10 questions. The scores that can be obtained from the scale range from 10 to 50. A high score on the scale indicates marital satisfaction.

The Marriage Life Scale (MLS; Turkish: Evlilik Yaşamı Ölçeği—EYÖ) is a 10-item, 5-point Likert-type scale developed by Tezer [22] to assess overall marital

**Table 1** Demographic information of the participants

Participant	Gender	Spouse's Age	Marriage Duration	Age at Marriage	Type of Marriage	Occupation	Spouse's Occupation	Number of Children
K1	Female	49	23 years	25	By Love	Lecturer	Lecturer	2
K2	Female	59	31 years	26	Arranged	Accounting	Commerce (Retired)	2
K3	Female	67	35 years	20	Arranged	Educator	Manager	1
K4	Female	46	20 years	20	Arranged	Psych. Counselor	Psych. Counselor	4
K5	Female	48	24 years	23	By Love	Teacher	Lecturer	2
K6	Male	47	23 years	26	Arranged	Lecturer	Psych. Counselor	2
K7	Female	48	15 years	25	Arranged	Housewife	Bakery Master	2
K8	Female	49	15 years	25	Arranged	Teacher	Lecturer	2
K9	Male	43	18 years	28	By Love	Sales-Marketing	Banker	2
K10	Male	55	29 years	28	Arranged	Civil Eng. (Retired)	Teacher	2
K11	Female	57	29 years	26	Arranged	Teacher	Civil Engineer	2
K12	Female	47	17 years	28	Arranged	Preschool Teacher	Financial Advisor	3
K13	Male	39	15 years	23	By Love	Teacher	Finance Manager	1
K14	Male	47	26 years	19	By Love	Sales-Marketing	Housewife	2



**Fig. 1** Code map for the analysis of long-term marriage dynamics – MAXQDA

satisfaction. Total scores range from 10 to 50, with higher scores indicating greater marital satisfaction. The psychometric properties of the scale indicate high reliability and validity. In the original validation study, the internal consistency coefficient (Cronbach’s alpha) was reported as 0.91 in the first application and 0.89 in the second application, while the test–retest reliability coefficient was 0.85. In addition, the scale demonstrated adequate discriminant and convergent validity, indicating that it is a reliable and valid instrument for assessing marital satisfaction.

**Personal information form**

A form was prepared to collect various demographic information about the individuals who participated in the study. This form was prepared by researchers on the basis of literature. The questions included in the form were as follows: age, spouse’s age, length of marriage, age at marriage, how they married, education level, occupation, presence of children, spouse’s occupation, etc.

**Interview form**

Researchers prepared a semi-structured interview guide consisting of 23 open-ended questions based on the

relevant literature to explore long-term marital dynamics. The full interview guide is provided in [Appendix](#).

**Data analysis**

The data for this study were obtained through semistructured interviews. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and written down by the researcher. The researcher transferred the interview text to the data analysis programme MaxQDA and used 24 qualitative analysis programmes in MaxQDA to analyze the data. Each participant’s views were examined and classified according to the codes and subthemes identified. Expert opinion was sought on whether each statement was correctly represented in its category.

**Findings**

In this section, of the study, the data obtained were analyzed via the data analysis programme MaxQDA 24. This qualitative study was conducted to gain insight into the dynamics of marriage among individuals who have been married for at least 15 years. All the data were examined and summarized in the form of codes and subthemes.

Figure 1 shows the codes and frequencies associated with long-term marriage factors. Companionship (27), sharing burdens (21), peace and security (23), reasonable

expectations (29), openness and expressing feelings (37), empathy and listening (24), love, respect, and patience (46), supporting one's partner (25), gratitude and appreciation (22), approval and recognition (14), division of household chores (34), holidays and special days (22), routines (chatting, drinking coffee, watching films) (41), and boundaries (46). These themes were grouped under six headings by the researchers to make the findings more understandable in line with the purpose of the study. These groups are as follows: sense of family and togetherness; communication; emotional dynamics; roles and responsibilities; spending time together; and boundaries.

### **Sense of family and togetherness**

This includes companionship and burdens sharing, which foster a shared sense of 'us.'

Under this heading, the meanings that married individuals attach to marriage, family, and togetherness are indicated. These meanings are concentrated in companionship (27), burdens (21), peace and security (23), and reasonable expectations (29). Examples from the participants' statements are provided below.

#### **Companionship**

Beyond physically walking along the same path, sharing a common life on an emotional and social level.

*"Marriage, in my opinion, is a companionship. Companionship is important; it makes your life easier and accompanies you. It is important whether it can add meaning to you and your life. In my opinion, marriage is companionship." (K3)*

*"It starts out more exciting, but over time it turns into a deeper friendship. Therefore, it starts out more exciting, but over time such a beautiful friendship becomes more valuable." (K6)*

*"At first it was a bit more individual. Then we spent more time together. We supported each other more. That support strengthened the bond between us." (K12)*

*"My real family is my spouse. That is truly the case. My spouse is my real family. I feel very incomplete without them." (K13)*

#### **A space of peace and security**

Refer to a space where one feels emotionally and psychologically secure.

*"My marriage is a space of peace and true freedom for me." (K6)*

*"Marriage is about sharing for me. Peace and giving value. Marriage is a relationship where two people carefully feel the value they give to each other's love." (K8)*

*"The meaning of my marriage has developed into my only haven of happiness where I feel completely at ease." (K3)*

#### **Shared burdens**

This refers to spouses facing difficulties together and supporting each other in the face of problems.

*"We overcame life's challenges by fighting together... There is always A Plan B, Plan C, Plan D. That is how we approach things." (K9)*

*"Being able to support each other in difficult times... I think it is important to support them emotionally and make them feel your presence."*

*"We had deaths. We had family problems. We had problems with my family or my spouse's family." (K12)*

*"My family, my own family had problems... We went through a lot of difficulties with that [my spouse] at the time." (K13)*

*"Financially, in 2001–2002, during the first years of our marriage, we faced many financial difficulties due to the poor performance of my business." (K9)*

#### **Having reasonable expectations**

Individuals should have realistic and achievable expectations in marriage.

*"Of course, I was not very young at the beginning, but you have many emotional expectations. Thank God my expectations were not in vain, but of course, you matured over time. However, your feelings become more deeply rooted. Marriage also becomes more grounded, but nothing changes in terms of care and love." (K8)*

*"They should initially marry without having too many expectations. In particular, they should start without having material expectations. This is important." (K5)*

*"I am the youngest child in my family, and since I saw all the marriage problems of my older siblings, I actually entered marriage with zero expectations..."*

*After getting married, as I got to know my spouse... I fell in love... it was beyond my expectations.” (K4)*

*‘My expectations were not realistic... For example, I now realize that I did not truly understand marriage before getting married... Then, as I experienced it, I understood that marriage is actually a part of life.’ (K12)*

*‘When you’re young, you look at things very emotionally. You cannot look at them logically. You get hurt more easily. Or your expectations are different. In addition, when you cannot find those expectations, it becomes a problem.’ (K2)*

### **Communication**

The ability of spouses to express their thoughts, feelings, and needs to each other.

When the responses of married individuals were analyzed, it was found that openness and transparency, the expression of feelings, and empathy and listening were prominent among couples. Examples of statements related to the themes of openness and expression of feelings (37) and empathy and listening (34) are provided below.

### **Openness**

The ability of an individual to express their thoughts and ideas to others in a transparent manner.

*“I now communicate more openly. However, there are still times when I want them to understand me. It is definitely important to be careful, not to say whatever comes to mind, but to speak thoughtfully and express your love and care for your spouse. Living a life with care and appreciation.” (K8)*

*‘I think sitting down and talking is very helpful in finding a solution... I think we resolved it by finding a middle ground because we wanted to eat the grapes, not beat the vineyard owner.’ (K9)*

*‘Over time, mutual communication and understanding increased harmony.’ (K6).*

*‘I think communication is very important in marriage. If you cannot communicate, cannot talk, and cannot share your problems, then it is not a real marriage, and I think there is a high chance it will not work out.’ (K2)*

*‘I think communication is the most important thing in marriage. When communication breaks down,*

*problems grow like mountains, like avalanches.’ (K11)*

### **Empathy and listening**

Trying to understand your partner’s feelings and thoughts without judging them.

*‘I value empathy very highly in regard to understanding my partner. I immediately think: how would I feel if this happened to me?’ (K3)*

*“I try to understand my partner and be patient. I try not to push them when they are upset or ignore their issues.” (K7)*

*‘The most effective method is to try to understand the other person. Over time, it becomes easier to understand them better and solve the problem.’ (K5)*

### **Emotional dynamics**

This reflects the emotional elements of marriage.

Marriage is an institution that involves a wide range of intense emotions. Canel [23] noted that in relationships where there is emotional closeness, basic emotional needs such as acceptance, love, compassion, respect, gratitude, and support are met [24]. Lewis and Spanier [24] describe emotional intimacy as a type of closeness that expresses feelings such as compassion, empathy, and trust between individuals [55].

### **Love, respect, and patience**

*Important relationship dynamics that strengthen emotional bonding between spouses.*

*‘What is important is that we respect each other. Where there is respect, love develops naturally. We need to learn to be patient.’ (K5)*

*‘Mutual respect, love, trust. Very important. It has become even more valuable over time. Very important for family harmony and continuity.’ (K8)*

*“We tried not to be disrespectful to each other as much as possible. We did not break that wall. That remained unchanged. I think trust also remained unchanged.” (K11)*

*‘Our family ties, our one-on-one relationships, within the framework of respect and love, our relationship as parents, or the respect and love our children feel for us, and the things they ask us. That never changes.’ (K8)*

*‘One of the parties needs to be accommodating and*

*remain calm. I think the important thing here is to learn patience and waiting, to learn to be patient.'* (K7)

### **Standing by one's partner**

This is an expression of fidelity, support and commitment between spouses.

*"Our friends say that we are like "Siamese twins" because we are always together in our marriage. My friendship with my spouse is very important, of course... My confidant, my companion, my protector, my guardian, my creator of opportunities. The pearl of my heart. The creator of my soul. My peace... I cannot imagine life without him. Without him, I would be lost. His friendship is the most valuable thing to me, as he is my most trusted friend."* (K3)

*'I think it has changed. Because at first, you do not know how much you can trust your spouse. Over time, as you get to know them, you develop a sense of trust... I can describe it as a mountain I can lean on.'* (K5)

*"He never shook my trust. My heart was not deceived, and he never surprised me in a negative way... With trust and affection, we surrendered to each other and crossed many paths with sincerity."* (K3)

*'My best friend is my spouse. I truly mean this sincerely. I do not have any other friends anyway... I do not think just being husband and wife is enough to sustain a marriage.'* (K14)

### **Gratitude and appreciation**

Appreciating your spouse's contributions, support, and presence.

*'All the things we do together give me immense pleasure and make me feel lucky and valued. It gives me a sense of peace to be remembered and loved.'* (K3)

*"I would describe my marriage as a happy and harmonious environment. My marriage is one of the most important values in my life."* (K6)

*'My marriage is one of the most important values in my life. It has become an even more valuable concept as time has passed.'* (K6)

### **Appreciation and approval**

Recognizing and expressing the positive aspects and contributions of one's spouse.

*"I would describe my marriage as a balanced one. It has also had a very positive impact on my life, I think. I have learned a lot from my spouse."* (K12)

*'I think of it as a partnership with someone I love, on the basis of respect and love. For me, it is an indispensable part of my life. Because without my family, my spouse, and my children, this world or life would not mean much to me.'* (K8)

### **Roles**

This refers to the division of tasks and responsibilities between spouses during marriage.

Studies in the fields of marriage and family have classified roles and responsibilities in various ways. These classifications have been examined under common categories such as areas of performance within the family, economic responsibility for the home, household chores, management of the family system, decisions, leadership, power, and physical, economic, and emotional support between spouses [24].

### **Domestic work division**

This refers to spouses taking on daily life responsibilities within marriage.

*'I do the housework and chores. I cook, but sometimes my spouse helps.' Financial responsibilities are shared.'* (K1)

*'I handle the household chores and services. Cooking is my responsibility, but my spouse helps sometimes.'* (K7)

*'The care of the household was my responsibility. Approximately 90% of it was on me. When I was stressed or struggling, and there was a necessity or obligation, he would help, of course.'* (K3)

*'Household chores and the responsibility for the children are mostly on me.'* (K1)

*'My spouse does the household chores. I'm not very skilled at household tasks. May God be pleased. My spouse does all the work, everything in the house.'* (K14)

*'He helps a lot with cleaning. He wipes, sweeps, everything.'* (K13)

### **Sharing responsibility**

Taking on financial and emotional responsibilities during marriage.

*'Although there are areas where we both take on more responsibility, we try to act together in many areas. We manage our expenses and decisions by making joint decisions.'* (K14)

*When raising children, of course, it was difficult to work and raise children at the same time, so as a woman, I felt an enormous burden on my shoulders... Then, during the children's school years, the burden of helping them with their studies was exhausting, especially when doing it together with the children.* (K11)

*'The responsibility for the child was always mine anyway, since my husband was working.'*(K4)

*'Financial responsibilities are shared.' My husband manages the budget. Sometimes he asks for my opinion on investment decisions.'*(K1)

*"The income... the income needed to manage the household was entirely his. Over time, this changed... Then I had to work. At that time, he was managing the financial side. Later, the responsibility for managing the finances fell to me... We have a shared account. He transfers his earnings into my account. I handle the necessary expenses. We manage it together by mutual agreement."*(K2)

*'With the children's involvement and as they grew up. It had both positive and negative aspects. Our responsibilities increased... However, the sheer volume of those responsibilities, for example, became exhausting after years.'* (K11)

### Spending time together

This refers to daily routines and special moments.

In marriage, this refers to many indoor and outdoor activities that family members enjoy together, such as watching TV, eating meals, visiting friends and family, and spending holidays together. It is known that spending time together helps strengthen marital bonds, promotes integration in marriage, and reinforces positive feelings such as respect, love, and acceptance between spouses [25]. In this study, the analysis of interviews with individuals in long-term marriages resulted in the participants' relevant statements being grouped under the theme of spending time together.

### Holidays and special days

*'I would like to do more of the things I want to do, that is, spend more time together'* (K9)

*'Visiting our loved ones. The heartfelt gestures we perform together for beautiful people. All these things we do together give me immense pleasure and make me feel lucky and valuable. They give me the peace of mind that comes from being remembered and loved.'* (K3)

### Routines (chatting, drinking coffee, watching films)

*'We go to work together in the morning, come back together in the evening, eat, and take care of the children.'* (K1)

*"I get up early in the morning. My spouse gets up a little later. However, we have breakfast together. We both work. When we come home in the evening, even if we are tired, is not it about being together, moving together? Being together is enjoyable."* (K10)

*"Our daily life is very busy... we can really spend time together on a few days of the week. When we are together, we try to do meaningful things as much as possible. Like movie time, going out together."* (K5)

*'Outside of work, we spend a significant amount of time together during the week and on weekends; doing activities at home, going out to eat, or going out.'* (K6)

*"Now that we're retired, we are always together. We start the day with breakfast together... We go for walks together. During breaks, we sip our coffee, chat, and discuss current issues."* (K3)

### Boundaries

Setting boundaries against interference from the extended family, marital problems, and keeping private matters within the marriage.

Studies on long-term marriages have shown that boundaries can prevent problems from escalating and may help avoid issues between spouses. However, spouses use setting clear boundaries with the family as a strategy to mitigate the risk of conflicts with the family of origin [26].

### Setting limits on extended family interference

Protecting the nuclear family from external influences, especially interference from the extended family.

*'We have two families... We have never interfered with our own nuclear family or our relationship as husband and wife. We have not allowed them to interfere either.'*

*'My wife's mother lived with us for a while and her sister also lived with us for a while. They say that living together does not work, and that is very true.'* (K2)

*"My wife's family sometimes undermined our marriage. Staying away reduced these negative effects."* (K4)

*'My spouse also supported me in this regard and did not allow anyone to interfere with the family.'* (K2)

*'My spouse behaved more balanced at this point. In order not to hurt either side or to manage the situation. I think this probably had a positive effect on our marriage.'* (K8)

### **Protection of privacy**

Keeping private matters between spouses private.

*'I wish I had been able to set boundaries earlier on. At the beginning of my marriage, I wish I had been able to set more boundaries with my spouse in certain areas.'* (K13)

*'Marital problems are the problem of those two people and should remain between them.'* (K8)

*'When I started my marriage, I had two resolutions. The first was that my basic rights and identity would be respected, and no one from the outside would be involved, no matter what happened.'* (K3)

*'Making joint decisions in the face of problems, not involving third parties in the marriage, valuing one's spouse—whether the woman values the man or the man values the woman—and listening to them...'* (K12)

## **Conclusions, discussion and recommendations**

### **Family and togetherness**

The findings indicate that a sense of family and togetherness plays a central role in sustaining long-term marriages. Participants frequently described marriage as a form of companionship, a partnership in hardship, and a shared sense of "we-ness" that develops and deepens over time. The results of this study suggest that, for the participants interviewed, marriage was often described as being shaped by emotional factors such as love, respect, and patience, as well as communication, boundaries, and responsibility. According to the findings of the study, people who have been married for a long time expressed that they see marriage more as companionship, a

partnership in hardship, and a sense of family and unity. Recent studies emphasize that perceiving marriage as a sense of togetherness, companionship, and shared meaning is a key factor in sustaining long-term marital satisfaction and stability [10, 12].

### **Communication**

Consistent with the findings, communication emerged as a fundamental component of long-term marital satisfaction, enabling spouses to express their thoughts and emotions openly, listen empathically, and resolve conflicts constructively. When the study findings were examined, communication styles between spouses were grouped under the subthemes of openness, transparency, listening, and empathy. The importance of a shared communication language—such as empathy, listening, openness, and transparency—in resolving marital problems and discussing issues of conflict was emphasized. Recent research indicates that open communication, empathic listening, and constructive conflict resolution remain among the strongest predictors of marital satisfaction in long-term relationships [13, 27].

### **Emotional dynamics**

The emotional dynamics identified in the findings highlight the importance of love, respect, trust, and patience in sustaining long-term marriages. Participants emphasized values such as love, respect, trust, patience, and commitment as fundamental elements sustaining their marital relationships over time. Trust emerged as a particularly significant factor, reinforcing emotional security and mutual support between spouses. In addition, expressions of gratitude, appreciation, and emotional understanding were highlighted as contributing to marital satisfaction and resilience. These emotional qualities enabled spouses to cope with challenges, remain committed to one another, and maintain a sense of emotional closeness throughout different stages of their marriage. Contemporary studies highlight that emotional processes such as trust, emotional support, appreciation, and commitment play a central role in maintaining marital quality across different stages of marriage [27, 28].

### **Roles and responsibilities**

The findings suggest that the sharing of roles and responsibilities contributes significantly to marital stability and continuity in long-term marriages. Participants indicated that a balanced and complementary division of responsibilities played an important role in sustaining their marriages. The findings showed that role sharing often followed traditional patterns, with male participants primarily assuming economic and external responsibilities, while female participants tended to undertake household-related tasks such as cooking and cleaning.

However, in marriages where women were employed outside the home, responsibilities were more flexibly shared, and mutual support in household and financial matters was emphasized. Consistent with the literature, participants associated the fair distribution of responsibilities and cooperation in daily tasks with greater marital harmony and satisfaction, suggesting that adaptability in role sharing strengthens long-term marital relationships. Recent findings suggest that flexible role sharing and perceived fairness in the division of responsibilities are positively associated with marital satisfaction and relationship stability in long-term marriages [29, 30].

### Spending time together

Spending time together, through daily routines and special moments, was identified as an important factor supporting marital continuity in long-term marriages. The findings indicate that spending time together strengthens emotional bonds between spouses and contributes to marital satisfaction. Participants emphasized the value of shared daily routines, such as talking, drinking coffee together, or watching television, as well as special occasions including holidays and celebrations. These shared moments were described as opportunities to reconnect, relax, and reinforce companionship. Consistent with the literature, participants reported that making time for one another, even in the context of everyday life, supports feelings of closeness and reinforces the sense of partnership that sustains long-term marriages. Recent studies also demonstrate that shared leisure activities and daily routines contribute to emotional closeness and reinforce relationship satisfaction among long-term married couples [23, 31].

### Boundaries

The findings emphasize that setting clear boundaries, particularly regarding extended family involvement, is essential for maintaining marital harmony in long-term marriages. Participants reported that protecting marital boundaries played a crucial role in sustaining their relationships over time. According to the findings, spouses emphasized the importance of not allowing third parties, including families of origin, to interfere in marital decisions and conflicts. Establishing clear boundaries, such as maintaining privacy, limiting external involvement, and addressing problems primarily within the marital relationship, was viewed as a key factor in preserving harmony and mutual respect. Consistent with the literature, participants indicated that effective boundary-setting helped prevent conflicts from escalating and supported marital stability in long-term marriages. Recent research further supports that establishing clear boundaries with extended family members reduces marital conflict and contributes to relationship harmony and stability [26].

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made for both practice and future research. Educational and counseling programs aiming to strengthen long-term marriages may benefit from focusing on key themes identified in this study, such as communication skills, emotional closeness, boundary-setting with extended family, and flexible role sharing. Couple and family counseling interventions may incorporate these dimensions to support marital stability and satisfaction over time.

For future research, longitudinal studies could further examine how marital dynamics evolve across different life stages, such as retirement or the transition to an empty nest. In addition, comparative and cross-cultural studies may provide deeper insights into how cultural contexts shape long-term marriage dynamics. Finally, future qualitative and mixed-methods studies may explore the role of friendship, companionship, and shared meaning in sustaining marital relationships.

These results are similar to those reported in the literature. Conducted a study on couples who had been married for 25 years or more and reported that elements such as trust, honesty, loyalty, sacrifice, and understanding form the basis of long-term marriages [25]. Similarly [1], emphasized that communication, shared values, and problem-solving skills are essential for sustaining long-term marriages. In a related investigation [18], examined 351 couples who had been married for 15 years or more and found that satisfied couples tended to view marriage as a lifelong commitment, whereas in less satisfying relationships, children emerged as the primary factor in maintaining the union. Some participants described their spouses as companions; this approach is similar to how individuals interpret the concept of 'companion' in their friendships during the transition to adulthood [29]. Studies examining the role of love in marital happiness and satisfaction have shown that communication, forgiveness, and shared values are at least as important as love and affection in sustaining long-term, harmonious marriages [29, 32]. These studies emphasize the importance of understanding marriage as a dynamic relationship that requires continuous effort to maintain happiness, harmony, and functionality over time. In addition, the meaning spouses attach to marriage, their expectations, and their personal characteristics play significant roles in marital satisfaction. Within marital relationships, couples assume mutual duties and responsibilities to achieve and sustain a harmonious and fulfilling partnership.

Research has also indicated that individuals whose marriages have lasted for a long time tend to maintain their relationships not through the initial excitement of early marriage, but through more realistic and concrete perceptions that strengthen the family structure [33]. A

review of the literature further suggests that individuals enter marriage with expectations of happiness, togetherness, and emotional sharing [34]. Studies have found that couples who communicate effectively, reach mutual agreements, and actively seek solutions to problems tend to experience more harmonious marriages [35]. In another study, participants described marriage as resembling a peaceful and supportive family home [36].

Regarding the division of labor, findings indicate that role distribution within marriage is often complementary. In the present study, male participants primarily assumed economic and external responsibilities, whereas female participants tended to undertake household tasks such as cooking and cleaning. In families where women were employed outside the home, responsibilities were more flexibly shared, and mutual assistance was emphasized. Consistent with these findings, previous research has shown that couples who share household chores experience greater marital harmony compared to those in which such tasks are performed by one partner alone [37]. The division of labor between couples was complementary. According to the findings of the study, male participants took on the economic and external responsibilities of the family, whereas female participants took on tasks such as cleaning and cooking within the home. In couples who adopt this division of labor, women do not work outside the home. In working women, mutual assistance is involved in the division of tasks [38] reported that those who do household chores with their spouse have greater marital harmony than those who perform household chores alone. A study conducted on couples who have been married for at least two years revealed that the sharing of household chores is related to marital satisfaction [39]. According to the findings, participants stated that the most important factor in maintaining marriage is not allowing third parties to interfere in family matters. Harmony in marriage is defined as individuals with different personality traits complementing each other to achieve satisfaction in marriage and establish common goals [40]. Similar results were obtained in this study, with participants describing marriage as a form of companionship, a partnership in adversity, and a place of peace and security. When examining other studies in the literature on marriage, factors such as understanding, harmony, communication, interest, sacrifice, sharing common values, passion, commitment, spiritual values, economic issues, friendship, relationships with the family of origin, trust, respect, and maturity [39, 41, 42].

Factors determining the quality of marriage, such as expectations and personal characteristics, extra-marital factors, marital problems, unity, togetherness, and equality [12, 43] have been identified. This study revealed themes similar to those reported in the literature. Another finding that emerged in line with the

participants' views on long-term marriage dynamics is that expectations should be moderate. Thoughts expressed that not everything can be perfect and that one cannot always be happy in marriage. Similar results have been reported in their studies. Unrealistic beliefs about marriage cause problems in marriage. It has been determined that unreasonable expectations, such as the expectation of constant attention from one's spouse or the desire for everything to be perfect, harm the stability and satisfaction of marriage and increase marital conflicts and stress levels among spouses [44]. The participants stated that expectations regarding marriage and spouses should be achievable and reasonable. When the study findings were examined, communication styles between spouses were grouped under the subthemes of openness, transparency, listening, and empathy. The importance of common communication language, such as empathy, listening, openness, and transparency, in resolving problems in marriage and discussing issues of conflict was emphasized. Different classifications of these behaviors are also found in the literature [45] evaluated such behaviors as conflict resolution styles in their study. In another study, such behavioral styles were referred to as repair attempts [46]. The participants stated that it is necessary to set boundaries with third parties regarding family matters to prevent problems or problems from escalating in marriages. Boundaries include not involving the family of origin when spouses make decisions, not sharing marital problems, and not allowing them to interfere in family matters [47]. In his study on the relationship between the bride and mother-in-law [26], stated that clear boundaries with the family of origin had a positive effect on the relationship between the family and the child; individuals who mentioned problems in their relationships with their family of origin coped with the negative aspects of the relationship by maintaining distance and displaying individual attitudes. The results of this study, which aimed to reveal the characteristics of long-term marriages, revealed that spouses spend time together, there is open communication between couples, the behaviors and responsibilities that come with their roles are fulfilled, and empathy and listening are important in solving problems and issues. The findings from this sample suggest that long-term marriages may be characterized by satisfaction, feelings of security and peace, and emotional dynamics such as respect, love, commitment, trust, gratitude, and appreciation. When examining the nature of the relationship between spouses, it was observed that they were happy spending time together and made efforts to effectively fulfil their roles and responsibilities.

To better identify the factors involved in marital relationships, similar studies can be conducted via bivariate analyses and longitudinal studies. This study consists of married individuals living in Turkey. For other studies,

marriages in different cultures and cross-cultural marital relationships can be compared. The results presented may contribute to educational programmes aimed at imparting factors that contribute to marriage to couples, as well as group psychological counseling and family counseling practices. In addition, on the basis of findings of this study, the following recommendations are made to deepen studies on long-term marriage dynamics.

- The effects of boundaries established with families of origin on marriage quality can be investigated.
- Another area of research could analyze the effects of life transitions such as retirement or empty nest syndrome on marital dynamics.
- Comparative studies could examine how friendship dynamics in marriage vary across cultures.
- Couple therapy and family counseling services could be expanded to increase couples' awareness of marriage.
- Allocating resources to marriage-related education and producing projects in this area by educational and public institutions could increase activities aimed at protecting the institution of marriage and family health.

### Limitations

This study has several limitations. The sample was small ( $N=14$ ) and purposive, which limits the generalizability of the findings. The gender distribution was unbalanced, with a higher proportion of women. All participants were from Turkey, so the results may not reflect the marital dynamics of couples in other cultural or socio-economic contexts. In addition, participants were selected on the basis of high scores on the Marriage Life Scale, which may have introduced selection bias. As with all interview-based research, data rely on self-report and may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability. Finally, the full transcripts contain sensitive personal information and therefore cannot be made publicly available, although anonymized extracts are included in the article and additional anonymized data may be provided on request.

### Appendix

#### Semi-structured interview guide (23 questions)

1. How would you generally describe your marriage and what does it mean to you?
2. How has the meaning of your marriage changed for you over the long period you have spent together?
3. How does your daily life with your spouse unfold?
4. From the beginning of your marriage to the present day, what are the most noticeable changes you have observed in your relationship, especially during different life stages?
5. What aspects of your relationship have remained the same over time?
6. What aspects of your relationship have changed over time?
7. What were your expectations when you first started your marriage?
8. How have these expectations changed over time, and how have you dealt with the differences between your initial expectations and today's reality?
9. How did you adapt to creating a shared lifestyle in the early years of your marriage?
10. How do you assess the role of communication in your marriage?
11. How often and in what ways do you express your feelings to your spouse?
12. Do you try to understand your spouse and show patience toward them? How do you usually do this? Can you share an example?
13. How are roles shared in your marriage?
14. How do you manage the family budget?
15. Are you able to make joint decisions regarding financial matters?
16. Have you faced any significant challenges throughout your marriage? Can you give examples?
17. What methods did you typically use to overcome these challenges?
18. Did these methods change over time? If so, how?
19. What was your approach to adaptation when facing challenges, and did you seek any external support during this process?
20. How did the disagreements you experienced and the ways you resolved them generally affect your marriage?
21. What impact did your own family and your spouse's family have on your marriage, and how did you manage these interactions?
22. What do you think are the most important factors that have contributed to the longevity of your marriage?
23. Looking back, is there anything you would have done differently in your marriage, and what advice would you give to today's young people or couples considering marriage for a long and happy marriage?

#### Abbreviations

MLS Marriage Life Scale (Turkish: Evlilik Yaşamı Ölçeği—EYÖ)  
MaxQDA Qualitative data analysis software

#### Supplementary Information

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Supplementary Material 1

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### Authors' contributions

Z.K.P. (Zeliha Kumbar Pala): Conceptualization, investigation, interviews, transcription, data curation, formal analysis, writing — original draft.Ç.Y.G. (Çiğdem Yavuz Güler): Methodology, supervision, validation, review & editing. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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### Data availability

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are not publicly available due to participant privacy and confidentiality but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

### Declarations

#### Ethics approval and consent to participate

The study protocol, including the consent procedure, was approved by the Ethics Committee of Fatih Sultan Mehmet Foundation University (Approval Number: 2025-47/11). The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntariness, anonymity, and the academic use of their data. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. Participants were told they could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences.

#### Consent for publication

Not applicable.

#### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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