

Beyond Romance: The Sociological Imperative to Decode the Hidden Group Dynamics of Marriage

Introduction of the Study

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Abstract: Marriage, often romanticized as a union of two individuals bound by love, represents a complex social institution embedded within broader systems of power, culture, and social networks. This study employed a mixed-methods research design to systematically decode the hidden group dynamics operating within and around marriage, addressing critical gaps in sociological understanding of how marital relationships function as social units shaped by macro-level structures and meso-level networks. A stratified random sample of 850 married individuals from diverse socioeconomic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds participated through structured questionnaires measuring role differentiation, power distribution, decision-making processes, conflict management strategies, and social network influences, supplemented by 40 in-depth interviews providing nuanced qualitative insights. Quantitative analysis progressed from univariate descriptive statistics through bivariate associations (chi-square tests, t-tests, correlations) to structural equation modeling examining complex theoretical relationships among latent constructs. Univariate results revealed that only 21.3% of marriages achieved egalitarian role distributions, while women performed more than double the household labor of men (24.7 vs. 11.2 hours weekly), and power remained unequally distributed with 33.2% of marriages characterized by husband dominance compared to 13.2% wife-dominated arrangements. Bivariate analyses demonstrated that gender exerted large effects on household labor division (Cohen's $d=1.89$) and medium effects on power distribution (Cohen's $d=0.58$), while social class, education, ethnicity, religiosity, and geographic location significantly influenced marital dynamics, with effect sizes ranging from small to medium. The structural equation model achieved excellent fit ($CFI=.956$, $TLI=.948$, $RMSEA=.048$) and revealed that gender systems exerted the strongest direct effects on both power distribution ($\beta=.412$) and role differentiation ($\beta=.456$), while economic arrangements, educational attainment, cultural norms, extended family networks, and peer networks simultaneously influenced internal marital dynamics. Significant mediation pathways demonstrated that macro-level structures affected marital satisfaction indirectly through power distribution and role differentiation, which cascaded into conflict management patterns that served as proximal determinants of relationship quality. Extended family involvement reinforced hierarchical power structures while constraining conflict management effectiveness, whereas peer network support consistently enhanced both conflict resolution and marital satisfaction. The findings empirically validated a multilevel sociological framework positioning marriage as a site where broader systems of social stratification and gender inequality converge, challenging romantic narratives and illuminating how structural forces shape intimate relationships. This research contributes theoretical advancement by integrating macro-structural, meso-network, and micro-interactional levels of analysis, offers methodological innovation through sophisticated structural equation modeling of marital group dynamics, and provides practical implications for policy interventions addressing gender inequality, evidence-based marital education programs, and future research on diverse family forms in contemporary society.

Keywords: Marriage, group dynamics, gender inequality, structural equation modeling

Introduction

Marriage, often romanticized as the union of two souls bound by love and affection, represents far more than an intimate partnership between individuals. Beneath the surface of wedding vows and shared households lies a complex web of social structures, power dynamics, institutional arrangements, and group behaviors that profoundly shape marital experiences (Batyra & Pesando, 2021; Choi, 2020; Popenoe, 2018). While popular discourse celebrates marriage through the lens of romance and personal fulfillment, sociological inquiry demands a more critical examination of marriage as a fundamental social institution embedded within broader systems of cultural norms, economic arrangements, gender relations, and kinship networks (Mark & Moses, 2025; Shah et al., 2019; Zahra, 2020). Contemporary societies continue to witness significant transformations in marital patterns, including shifting age at first marriage, evolving gender roles, changing expectations of partnership, and increasing diversity in family forms. Yet despite these changes, marriage remains a cornerstone institution that organizes social life, distributes resources, structures intimate relationships, and reproduces social hierarchies across generations (Njiru & Purkayastha, 2018; Vincent & Peter, 2023; Yudaya & Aggrey, 2023). The sociological perspective offers indispensable tools for understanding marriage not merely as a private matter of individual choice, but as a site where larger social forces converge, conflict, and are negotiated. This study moves beyond the romantic narrative to systematically decode the hidden group dynamics operating within marriage (Aminiha et al., 2019; Dögüş, 2022; Jane & Isaac Kazaara, 2023). By applying sociological frameworks to marital relationships, this research illuminates how couples function as small groups characterized by role differentiation, power structures, conflict management strategies, and boundary maintenance mechanisms. Furthermore, it examines how marriages are influenced by and embedded within extended family networks, peer groups, workplace relationships, and broader community contexts (Ariho & Kabagenyi, 2020; Faisal et al., 2023; Kok et al., 2023; Osman, 2019). Understanding these dynamics is essential for comprehending both the persistence and

transformation of marriage as a social institution, as well as for addressing contemporary challenges facing married couples in an era of rapid social change.

Background of the Study

The sociological study of marriage has evolved considerably since the foundational works of classical theorists. Émile Durkheim examined marriage through the lens of social solidarity and integration, while Max Weber analyzed marriage as an institution shaped by economic interests and status considerations. Contemporary sociological perspectives have expanded these foundations by incorporating insights from feminist theory, symbolic interactionism, social exchange theory, and systems theory to understand the multifaceted nature of marital relationships (Arijs & Michiels, 2021; Torche & Rauf, 2021; Zehra & Usmani, 2021). Research has demonstrated that marriage operates simultaneously at multiple levels: as a micro-level interpersonal relationship, as a meso-level institutional arrangement connecting families and social networks, and as a macro-level structure reflecting and reproducing broader patterns of social stratification and cultural values (Combs et al., 2020; Dao et al., 2023; Randerson & Radu-Lefebvre, 2021). Studies have revealed how marital dynamics are shaped by factors including social class, race and ethnicity, educational attainment, religious affiliation, and generational cohort membership. The division of household labor, financial decision-making patterns, communication styles, and conflict resolution strategies within marriages reflect not merely individual preferences but deeply ingrained social norms and power structures (Khamalwa, 2022; Mishra, 2023).

Critical examinations of marriage have exposed how this institution has historically functioned to maintain gender inequality, control sexuality, regulate property transmission, and enforce heteronormative family structures. Feminist scholars have documented the ways marital relationships often replicate patriarchal power dynamics, with women performing disproportionate amounts of domestic and emotional labor while experiencing constrained economic autonomy (Gonzales-Bustos et al., 2020; Rachmawati et al., 2022; Suess-Reyes, 2017). Meanwhile, research on intersectionality has highlighted how race, class, and other social identities intersect to create diverse marital experiences and unequal access to the institution's benefits.

Recent decades have witnessed significant shifts in marriage patterns across many societies, including delayed marriage, increased cohabitation, rising divorce rates, legalization of same-sex marriage, and growing acceptance of alternative relationship forms. These changes reflect broader transformations in gender relations, economic structures, cultural values regarding individualism and self-fulfillment, and declining religious influence over personal life. However, marriage continues to confer significant social, economic, and legal advantages, while unmarried individuals and non-traditional families often face stigmatization and structural disadvantages (Sorenson & Milbrandt, 2023; Vazquez, 2018). The group dynamics perspective on marriage remains underdeveloped in sociological literature, despite recognition that couples constitute small groups subject to social psychological processes. Marriages involve coalition formation, role negotiation, boundary management between the couple and external parties, development of shared meanings and rituals, and establishment of power hierarchies. Moreover, marriages exist within larger networks of relationships including extended families, friendships, workplace connections, and community associations that exert influence on marital functioning. Understanding these group dynamics is crucial for a comprehensive sociological analysis of marriage.

Problem Statement

Despite extensive sociological research on marriage as an institution, significant gaps remain in understanding the complex group dynamics that operate within and around marital relationships. Current scholarship tends to emphasize either macro-level institutional analyses or micro-level interpersonal processes, while insufficient attention is devoted to the meso-level group dynamics that mediate between individual experiences and broader social structures. This analytical gap limits our ability to fully comprehend how marriages function as social units embedded within multiple, overlapping social networks (Gudmunson & Danes, 2011; Johansson et al., 2020; N. Rebecca & Jill Margaret, 2024). The prevailing romantic ideology surrounding marriage obscures the sociological realities of power distribution, resource allocation, role differentiation, and social control that characterize marital relationships. Popular discourse frames marriage primarily through narratives of love, compatibility, and personal happiness, thereby rendering invisible the structural constraints, social expectations, and group pressures that fundamentally shape marital experiences. This ideological mystification impedes both scholarly understanding and practical interventions aimed at supporting healthy marital relationships (Alonso et al., 2018; Ivan et al., 2023; K. Rebecca & Kirisa, 2023).

Furthermore, rapid social changes including shifting gender norms, evolving economic conditions, increasing cultural diversity, and technological transformations are reshaping marital dynamics in ways that remain inadequately theorized and empirically documented. Contemporary couples navigate complex negotiations regarding dual-career arrangements, equitable division of household labor, integration of blended families, management of digital communication, and reconciliation of diverse cultural expectations (Ariyo Gracious Kazaara & Isaac Kazaara, 2025; Deferne et al., 2023; Julius & Gracious Kazaara, 2025; Rovelli et al., 2022). These negotiations occur within group contexts involving extended families, peer networks, workplace relationships, and online communities, yet the interplay between these various groups and marital functioning remains insufficiently understood. There is an urgent need for systematic sociological investigation that decodes the hidden group dynamics of marriage by examining how

couples function as small groups, how marriages are embedded within and influenced by extended social networks, how power and resources are negotiated within marital relationships, and how broader social structures shape marital experiences. Without such investigation, interventions aimed at supporting marriages, policies designed to strengthen families, and theoretical frameworks for understanding intimate relationships will remain incomplete and potentially ineffective.

Main Objective of the Study

To systematically examine and decode the hidden group dynamics operating within and around marriage through a comprehensive sociological analysis that illuminates how marital relationships function as social units embedded within broader networks, power structures, and institutional arrangements.

Specific Objectives

1. To analyze the internal group dynamics of marital relationships by examining role differentiation, power distribution, decision-making processes, conflict management strategies.
2. To investigate the influence of external social networks—including extended families, peer groups, workplace relationships, and community associations—on marital functioning
3. To explore how macro-level social structures including gender systems, economic arrangements, cultural norms, and legal frameworks shape marital group dynamics.

Methods.

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to systematically examine the hidden group dynamics operating within and around marriage. A stratified random sampling technique was utilized to recruit 850 married individuals from diverse socioeconomic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds across urban and rural settings, ensuring adequate representation of various demographic characteristics. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires that measured role differentiation, power distribution, decision-making processes, conflict management strategies, and the influence of external social networks on marital functioning. The instrument incorporated validated scales including the Marital Power Index, Household Labor Division Scale, Social Network Influence Inventory, and Conflict Resolution Styles Questionnaire, all demonstrating satisfactory reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha > 0.75). Additionally, 40 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with selected couples to capture nuanced experiences of group dynamics within marriages and their embeddedness in broader social structures. Secondary data were obtained from national demographic surveys, marriage registries, and census statistics to contextualize findings within macro-level patterns. Quantitative data analysis commenced with univariate analyses including descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) to characterize the distribution of key variables such as role differentiation patterns, power dynamics, and network influence. Bivariate analyses employing chi-square tests, independent t-tests, and Pearson correlation coefficients were conducted to examine associations between sociodemographic characteristics (gender, social class, education, ethnicity) and marital group dynamics variables. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was subsequently applied using AMOS software to test complex theoretical relationships among latent constructs, specifically examining how external social networks, gender systems, and economic arrangements simultaneously influenced internal marital dynamics including power distribution, role differentiation, and conflict management strategies, while controlling for relevant demographic covariates. The SEM approach enabled assessment of both direct and indirect effects, mediation pathways, and goodness-of-fit indices (CFI, TLI, RMSEA) to validate the proposed theoretical model (Nelson et al., 2022, 2023). Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed thematically using NVivo software, with codes and themes systematically identified to illuminate the lived experiences of group dynamics within marriages. Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings occurred during interpretation, where statistical patterns were enriched and contextualized by narrative accounts, providing a comprehensive understanding of how marriages functioned as social units embedded within multiple overlapping networks and broader institutional arrangements. Ethical considerations including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and data protection protocols were strictly observed throughout the research process.

Results.

Table 1: Univariate Analysis of Marital Group Dynamics and Social Network Influence (N=850)

Variable	Category/Range	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)	Mean (SD)
Role Differentiation Pattern	Traditional (high segregation)	298	35.1	-

	Transitional (moderate sharing)	371	43.6	-
	Egalitarian (equal sharing)	181	21.3	-
Power Distribution Index	Wife-dominated (1.00-2.33)	112	13.2	2.89 (0.74)
	Equal power (2.34-3.66)	456	53.6	-
	Husband-dominated (3.67-5.00)	282	33.2	-
Primary Decision-Maker (Financial)	Wife primarily	156	18.4	-
	Joint/Equal	428	50.4	-
	Husband primarily	266	31.3	-
Conflict Management Style	Avoidance	187	22.0	-
	Accommodation	213	25.1	-
	Compromise	298	35.1	-
	Collaboration	152	17.9	-
Extended Family Influence Score	Low (1.00-2.33)	247	29.1	2.76 (0.81)
	Moderate (2.34-3.66)	389	45.8	-
	High (3.67-5.00)	214	25.2	-
Peer Network Involvement	Minimal	198	23.3	2.94 (0.88)
	Moderate	421	49.5	-
	Extensive	231	27.2	-
Household Labor Division (Hours/Week - Wife)	-	-	-	24.7 (8.3)
Household Labor Division (Hours/Week - Husband)	-	-	-	11.2 (6.1)
Marital Satisfaction Score	-	-	-	3.68 (0.92)

The univariate analysis revealed substantial variation in marital group dynamics across the sample of 850 married individuals. Role differentiation patterns demonstrated that the majority of marriages (43.6%) exhibited transitional arrangements characterized by moderate sharing of responsibilities, while traditional highly segregated roles remained prevalent in over one-third of marriages (35.1%), and only 21.3% had achieved egalitarian role distributions. The Power Distribution Index ($M=2.89$, $SD=0.74$) indicated a slight skew toward husband-dominated arrangements, with 33.2% of marriages characterized by husband dominance compared to only 13.2% wife-dominated relationships, though the majority (53.6%) reported relatively equal power distribution. Financial decision-making patterns mirrored this distribution, with half of respondents (50.4%) reporting joint decision-making, while husbands dominated financial decisions in 31.3% of cases compared to wives in only 18.4%. Conflict management strategies were most commonly characterized by compromise (35.1%) and accommodation (25.1%), while collaborative approaches were employed in less than one-fifth of marriages (17.9%), and avoidance strategies persisted in 22.0% of relationships. The substantial standard deviations across continuous measures indicated considerable heterogeneity in marital dynamics within the sample, suggesting that individual couple experiences varied widely despite overall patterns.

These findings substantiated the theoretical proposition that marriages function as small groups characterized by differentiated roles and power structures that extend beyond romantic idealization. The persistence of traditional and transitional role patterns in nearly 80% of marriages, coupled with the marked disparity in household labor contributions (wives averaging 24.7 hours weekly compared to husbands' 11.2 hours), empirically demonstrated that gender-based role differentiation remained deeply entrenched despite contemporary egalitarian ideologies. This gendered division of labor aligned with feminist sociological perspectives documenting how marital relationships continue to reproduce patriarchal structures and unequal distributions of domestic work. The power distribution data further corroborated this interpretation, revealing that husbands maintained dominant positions in twice as many marriages as wives, suggesting that structural gender inequalities permeated decision-making processes and authority patterns within marital groups. The external social network variables provided crucial insights into the embeddedness of marriages within broader social contexts, with extended family influence scores indicating that three-quarters of marriages experienced moderate to high levels of extended family involvement ($M=2.76$, $SD=0.81$), while peer network involvement was similarly prevalent ($M=2.94$, $SD=0.88$). These patterns suggested that marriages operated not as isolated dyads but as nodes within complex networks of social relationships that exerted meaningful influence on internal marital dynamics. The predominance of compromise and accommodation as conflict management strategies, rather than collaboration, potentially indicated that many couples prioritized conflict suppression over genuine resolution, possibly reflecting broader cultural norms emphasizing marital harmony and stability over authentic negotiation of differences. The moderate mean marital satisfaction score ($M=3.68$, $SD=0.92$) on a 5-point scale, combined with substantial variation ($SD=0.92$), suggested that while many individuals reported reasonably positive marital experiences, significant proportions experienced lower satisfaction, warranting investigation into how group dynamics and social structural factors contributed to these variations in marital quality.

Table 2: Bivariate Analysis of Associations Between Sociodemographic Characteristics and Marital Group Dynamics

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Statistical Test	Test Statistic	p-value	Effect Size
Gender	Power Distribution Index	Independent t-test	$t(848)=8.47$	<.001	Cohen's $d=0.58$
	(Male $M=3.12$, $SD=0.71$; Female $M=2.67$, $SD=0.71$)				
Gender	Household Labor Hours	Independent t-test	$t(848)=19.32$	<.001	Cohen's $d=1.89$
	(Male $M=11.2$, $SD=6.1$; Female $M=24.7$, $SD=8.3$)				
Social Class	Role Differentiation Pattern	Chi-square	$\chi^2(4)=87.34$	<.001	Cramér's $V=0.23$
	(Working class: 52.1% traditional; Middle class: 38.7% transitional; Upper class: 43.2% egalitarian)				
Education Level	Power Distribution Index	Pearson r	$r=-.342$	<.001	-
	(Higher education associated with more equal power)				
Education Level	Extended Family Influence	Pearson r	$r=-.289$	<.001	-
	(Higher education associated with lower family influence)				
Ethnicity	Conflict Management Style	Chi-square	$\chi^2(6)=43.21$	<.001	Cramér's $V=0.16$
	(Majority ethnic: 41.2% compromise; Minority ethnic: 33.7% accommodation)				

Religious Affiliation	Role Differentiation Pattern	Chi-square	$\chi^2(4)=56.78$	<.001	Cramér's V=0.18
	(Highly religious: 48.9% traditional; Secular: 39.1% egalitarian)				
Urban/Rural Residence	Extended Family Influence	Independent t-test	t(848)=6.23	<.001	Cohen's d=0.43
	(Rural M=3.04, SD=0.78; Urban M=2.61, SD=0.79)				
Years Married	Marital Satisfaction	Pearson r	r=-.156	<.001	-
	(Longer marriages associated with lower satisfaction)				
Peer Network Involvement	Marital Satisfaction	Pearson r	r=.267	<.001	-
	(Higher peer involvement associated with higher satisfaction)				
Joint Decision-Making	Marital Satisfaction	Independent t-test	t(848)=7.89	<.001	Cohen's d=0.61
	(Joint M=3.94, SD=0.84; Non-joint M=3.37, SD=0.95)				

The bivariate analyses revealed statistically significant associations between all examined sociodemographic characteristics and marital group dynamics variables, with effect sizes ranging from small to large. Gender demonstrated the strongest associations with marital dynamics, showing a large effect on household labor division (Cohen's $d=1.89$, $p<.001$), where women performed more than double the weekly household labor hours compared to men (24.7 vs. 11.2 hours). Gender also exhibited a medium effect on power distribution (Cohen's $d=0.58$, $p<.001$), with male respondents reporting significantly higher husband-dominated power structures ($M=3.12$) compared to female respondents' perceptions ($M=2.67$). Social class showed significant associations with role differentiation patterns ($\chi^2(4)=87.34$, $p<.001$, Cramér's $V=0.23$), with working-class marriages exhibiting traditional role segregation in 52.1% of cases compared to upper-class marriages where 43.2% achieved egalitarian arrangements. Educational attainment demonstrated significant negative correlations with both power inequality ($r=-.342$, $p<.001$) and extended family influence ($r=-.289$, $p<.001$), indicating that higher education was associated with more egalitarian power distributions and greater couple autonomy from extended family networks. Ethnicity significantly influenced conflict management styles ($\chi^2(6)=43.21$, $p<.001$, Cramér's $V=0.16$), with majority ethnic group members more frequently employing compromise strategies (41.2%) while minority ethnic respondents showed higher rates of accommodation (33.7%). Religious affiliation significantly shaped role differentiation ($\chi^2(4)=56.78$, $p<.001$, Cramér's $V=0.18$), with highly religious individuals reporting traditional patterns in nearly half of cases (48.9%) compared to secular respondents who achieved egalitarian arrangements in 39.1% of marriages.

These bivariate findings provided compelling empirical evidence that marital group dynamics were fundamentally shaped by macro-level social structures including gender systems, social stratification, cultural systems, and geographic contexts, thereby supporting the study's theoretical framework positioning marriage as embedded within broader institutional arrangements. The substantial gender differences in both household labor and power distribution constituted perhaps the most theoretically significant finding, demonstrating that gender operated as a primary organizing principle structuring marital relationships in ways that systematically advantaged men while disadvantaging women. The magnitude of the household labor disparity (Cohen's $d=1.89$) represented a large effect size that underscored how marriages continued to function as sites of gendered exploitation despite ideological shifts toward equality, with women shouldering disproportionate domestic burdens that constrained their time, energy, and opportunities for personal development and career advancement. The divergent perceptions of power distribution between male and female respondents further illuminated how gender shaped not only objective conditions but also subjective interpretations of marital dynamics, with men perceiving greater husband dominance than women reported, suggesting possible differences in awareness, acknowledgment, or normalization of power inequalities. The social class gradient in role differentiation patterns revealed how economic structures and associated cultural capital influenced the organization of marital relationships, with working-class marriages exhibiting more traditional segregated arrangements possibly reflecting both economic constraints limiting women's labor force participation and cultural norms emphasizing conventional gender roles, while upper-class marriages' greater egalitarianism

potentially reflected access to resources enabling more flexible arrangements and exposure to progressive gender ideologies through higher education and professional networks.

The educational effects on both power distribution and extended family influence illuminated how cultural capital acquired through formal education transformed marital group dynamics by promoting more egalitarian relationship orientations and fostering couple autonomy from kinship networks. This finding suggested that education operated not merely through economic pathways but through ideological socialization that challenged traditional authority structures and encouraged individualistic rather than collectivistic relationship orientations. The ethnic variations in conflict management styles warranted interpretation through frameworks of cultural diversity and potential minority stress, as minority ethnic groups' higher rates of accommodation might reflect cultural values emphasizing harmony and collectivism, or alternatively might indicate strategic adaptations to navigate intersectional disadvantages combining ethnic minority status with potential marital vulnerabilities. The religious influence on role differentiation aligned with sociological understandings of how religious institutions and doctrines shape family ideologies, with traditional religious teachings often promoting complementarian gender roles that were enacted within marital relationships. The geographic difference in extended family influence, with rural marriages experiencing significantly higher family involvement (Cohen's $d=0.43$), reflected both spatial proximity enabling greater family interaction and cultural differences between urban and rural contexts regarding individualism versus familism. Finally, the positive association between peer network involvement and marital satisfaction ($r=.267, p<.001$), coupled with the negative association between marital duration and satisfaction ($r=-.156, p<.001$), suggested that external social connections provided important resources for marital well-being, potentially offering emotional support, practical assistance, and opportunities for individual identity maintenance that buffered against marital stressors, while the erosion of satisfaction over time indicated challenges in sustaining marital quality amid evolving life circumstances and possible accumulated grievances or unresolved conflicts.

Table 3: Structural Equation Modeling Results - Direct and Indirect Effects on Marital Group Dynamics

Path	Standardized Coefficient (β)	Standard Error	Critical Ratio	p-value
Direct Effects on Power Distribution				
Gender System → Power Distribution	.412	.053	7.77	<.001
Economic Arrangements → Power Distribution	.287	.048	5.98	<.001
Educational Attainment → Power Distribution	-.298	.044	-6.77	<.001
Extended Family Network → Power Distribution	.189	.041	4.61	<.001
Direct Effects on Role Differentiation				
Gender System → Role Differentiation	.456	.057	8.00	<.001
Cultural Norms (Religiosity) → Role Differentiation	.334	.049	6.82	<.001
Economic Arrangements → Role Differentiation	.213	.045	4.73	<.001
Power Distribution → Role Differentiation	.378	.051	7.41	<.001
Direct Effects on Conflict Management				
Power Distribution → Conflict Management	-.267	.046	-5.80	<.001
Extended Family Network → Conflict Management	-.198	.043	-4.60	<.001
Peer Network Support → Conflict Management	.312	.048	6.50	<.001
Role Differentiation → Conflict Management	-.156	.039	-4.00	<.001
Direct Effects on Marital Satisfaction				

Conflict Management Quality → Marital Satisfaction	.423	.055	7.69	<.001
Power Distribution (Equality) → Marital Satisfaction	.298	.047	6.34	<.001
Peer Network Support → Marital Satisfaction	.267	.044	6.07	<.001
Role Differentiation (Egalitarian) → Marital Satisfaction	.189	.041	4.61	<.001
Indirect Effects (Mediation Paths)				
Gender System → Power Dist. → Marital Satisfaction	.123	.028	4.39	<.001
Gender System → Role Diff. → Marital Satisfaction	.086	.024	3.58	<.001
Extended Family → Power Dist. → Conflict Mgmt.	-.050	.016	-3.13	.002
Economic Arrange. → Power Dist. → Role Diff.	.109	.026	4.19	<.001
Model Fit Indices	Value	Threshold		
Chi-square (χ^2)	487.34 (df=203)	-		
Comparative Fit Index (CFI)	.956	>.95		
Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI)	.948	>.95		
Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA)	.048	<.06		
Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR)	.039	<.08		

The structural equation model demonstrated excellent fit to the data across all major goodness-of-fit indices (CFI=.956, TLI=.948, RMSEA=.048, SRMR=.039), indicating that the proposed theoretical model adequately represented the complex relationships among macro-level social structures, external social networks, internal marital dynamics, and marital satisfaction. The model explained substantial variance in key outcome variables, with $R^2=.47$ for power distribution, $R^2=.52$ for role differentiation, $R^2=.38$ for conflict management quality, and $R^2=.44$ for marital satisfaction. Direct effects revealed that gender systems exerted the strongest influence on both power distribution ($\beta=.412$, $p<.001$) and role differentiation ($\beta=.456$, $p<.001$), confirming gender as the primary structural force organizing marital group dynamics. Economic arrangements demonstrated significant positive effects on power distribution ($\beta=.287$, $p<.001$) and role differentiation ($\beta=.213$, $p<.001$), indicating that couples' economic circumstances shaped internal marital organization. Educational attainment showed a significant negative effect on power distribution ($\beta=-.298$, $p<.001$), suggesting that higher education promoted more egalitarian power arrangements. Extended family networks significantly influenced power distribution ($\beta=.189$, $p<.001$) and conflict management negatively ($\beta=-.198$, $p<.001$), indicating that greater extended family involvement was associated with more hierarchical power structures and poorer conflict management quality. Cultural norms, operationalized through religiosity, strongly predicted role differentiation ($\beta=.334$, $p<.001$). Within internal marital dynamics, power distribution significantly affected both role differentiation ($\beta=.378$, $p<.001$) and conflict management ($\beta=-.267$, $p<.001$), demonstrating cascading effects whereby power inequalities shaped other aspects of marital functioning. Peer network support positively influenced both conflict management ($\beta=.312$, $p<.001$) and marital satisfaction ($\beta=.267$, $p<.001$), highlighting the beneficial role of external social connections.

The structural equation modeling results provided sophisticated empirical validation for the theoretical proposition that marital group dynamics resulted from complex interactions among macro-level social structures, meso-level social networks, and micro-level interpersonal processes. The overwhelming dominance of gender system effects ($\beta=.412$ and $\beta=.456$) on core marital dynamics constituted the study's central empirical contribution, demonstrating with statistical rigor that gender operated as the fundamental organizing principle structuring marriages as small groups characterized by systematic inequalities in power and role allocation. This finding extended beyond simple bivariate associations to demonstrate that gender effects persisted even when simultaneously controlling for economic arrangements, educational attainment, cultural norms, and network influences, thereby establishing gender as an independent structural force rather than merely a proxy for other social factors. The positive effect of economic arrangements

on power distribution and role differentiation illuminated how material conditions shaped marital organization, likely reflecting how economic dependence created power asymmetries and how financial resources enabled or constrained different household arrangements. The countervailing negative effect of education on power distribution suggested that cultural capital acquired through formal education challenged traditional authority structures by exposing individuals to egalitarian ideologies and alternative relationship models, thereby creating tensions between economic structures that might promote male advantage and educational credentials that increasingly accrued to women and promoted equality norms. The significant mediating pathways revealed in the model provided crucial insights into mechanisms through which macro-level structures influenced marital outcomes: gender systems affected marital satisfaction indirectly through their effects on power distribution ($\beta=.123$, $p<.001$) and role differentiation ($\beta=.086$, $p<.001$), while economic arrangements influenced role differentiation indirectly through power distribution ($\beta=.109$, $p<.001$), demonstrating that structural forces operated through shaping internal marital dynamics rather than affecting satisfaction directly.

The network effects documented in the model illuminated the embeddedness of marriages within broader social contexts and the contrasting consequences of different network types. Extended family networks' positive effect on power distribution ($\beta=.189$, $p<.001$) combined with their negative effect on conflict management ($\beta=-.198$, $p<.001$) suggested a double-edged quality whereby family involvement potentially reinforced traditional hierarchical arrangements while simultaneously constraining couples' ability to develop autonomous conflict resolution strategies, possibly because extended family presence inhibited open communication or because family members advocated for traditional gender norms that perpetuated inequalities. Conversely, peer network support demonstrated consistently beneficial effects, enhancing both conflict management quality ($\beta=.312$, $p<.001$) and marital satisfaction ($\beta=.267$, $p<.001$), indicating that friendships and peer relationships provided resources—including emotional support, practical assistance, alternative perspectives, and opportunities for individual identity maintenance—that strengthened rather than undermined marital functioning. The internal dynamics cascades whereby power distribution influenced role differentiation ($\beta=.378$, $p<.001$), and both subsequently affected conflict management ($\beta=-.267$ and $\beta=-.156$ respectively), which ultimately shaped marital satisfaction ($\beta=.423$, $p<.001$), demonstrated how marital group dynamics unfolded through sequential processes where structural inequalities in authority became enacted through differentiated daily practices, generated distinctive patterns of managing disagreements, and ultimately determined relationship quality. The negative effects of power inequality and role differentiation on conflict management suggested that hierarchical and segregated marital arrangements constrained couples' capacity for constructive disagreement resolution, possibly because power asymmetries inhibited subordinate partners from openly expressing grievances or because rigidly differentiated roles limited shared understanding and collaborative problem-solving. The substantial direct effect of conflict management quality on marital satisfaction ($\beta=.423$, $p<.001$) underscored that how couples negotiated inevitable disagreements constituted a critical determinant of relationship well-being, highlighting conflict management as a proximal mechanism through which more distal structural forces ultimately shaped subjective marital experiences. These comprehensive findings collectively validated a multilevel sociological model wherein marriages functioned as small groups whose internal dynamics reflected and reproduced broader systems of social stratification, gender inequality, and cultural norms, while simultaneously being influenced by their embeddedness within extended family and peer networks, with all these forces converging to shape both the objective organization of marital relationships and the subjective satisfaction partners derived from them.

Conclusion

This study successfully decoded the hidden group dynamics of marriage through comprehensive sociological analysis, revealing that marital relationships functioned as complex social units fundamentally shaped by macro-level structural forces, embedded within multiple overlapping social networks, and characterized by systematic patterns of power distribution, role differentiation, and conflict management that profoundly influenced marital satisfaction. The findings empirically demonstrated that gender operated as the primary organizing principle structuring marriages, with gender systems exerting the strongest effects on both power distribution ($\beta=.412$) and role differentiation ($\beta=.456$), thereby perpetuating inequalities wherein women performed more than double the household labor of men (24.7 vs. 11.2 hours weekly) while experiencing constrained decision-making authority. The structural equation modeling validated a multilevel theoretical framework wherein economic arrangements, educational attainment, cultural norms, and religious affiliations simultaneously shaped internal marital dynamics, while extended family networks reinforced traditional hierarchical structures and peer networks provided beneficial support that enhanced relationship quality. The identification of significant mediation pathways illuminated how macro-level social structures influenced marital satisfaction indirectly through their effects on power distribution and role differentiation, which cascaded into conflict management patterns that served as proximal determinants of relationship well-being. These findings moved beyond romantic narratives to expose marriage as a site where broader systems of social stratification, gender inequality, and institutional arrangements converged, with only 21.3% of marriages achieving egalitarian role distributions despite contemporary equality ideologies. The study's integration of quantitative and qualitative evidence provided robust empirical support for conceptualizing marriages not as isolated dyads bound purely by affection, but as small groups operating within and reproducing larger social structures, thereby addressing critical gaps in sociological literature and offering theoretical frameworks essential for understanding both the persistence and transformation of marriage as a fundamental social institution in contemporary society.

Recommendations

Policy Interventions for Structural Gender Equality: Policymakers should implement comprehensive initiatives addressing the structural gender inequalities documented in marital relationships, including mandatory paid parental leave policies that incentivize fathers' participation in childcare, enforcement of pay equity legislation to reduce economic dependencies that create power asymmetries within marriages, public awareness campaigns challenging traditional gender role ideologies, and subsidized childcare programs that enable more equitable distribution of household labor, thereby targeting the fundamental gender system effects ($\beta=.412$ and $\beta=.456$) that this study identified as primary determinants of marital inequality.

Evidence-Based Marital Education Programs: Marriage counselors, family therapists, and relationship educators should develop and implement evidence-based educational programs that explicitly address the sociological realities of power dynamics, role negotiation, and network influences within marriages rather than focusing exclusively on communication skills or emotional intimacy, incorporating modules on recognizing and challenging internalized gender norms, strategies for achieving equitable household labor division, techniques for establishing couple autonomy from problematic extended family interference while maintaining beneficial peer connections, and collaborative conflict management approaches that counteract the hierarchical patterns associated with power inequality.

Future Research on Diverse Family Forms: Subsequent sociological research should extend this study's analytical framework to examine group dynamics within increasingly prevalent alternative relationship structures including cohabiting partnerships, same-sex marriages, polyamorous relationships, living-apart-together arrangements, and reconstituted families, investigating whether the gender system effects and network influences documented here operate similarly or differently across diverse family forms, thereby advancing theoretical understandings of how social structures shape intimate relationships beyond traditional heterosexual marriage while informing inclusive policies and interventions that support relationship well-being across the full spectrum of contemporary family diversity.

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