



Exploring Interpersonal Relationship Dynamics of Newlywed Arranged Marital Couples from Tamil Nadu, India: A Narrative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Published Online: February 11, 2026

The practice of arranged marriage is an area of concern in the changing milieu in India. When young couples start their relationship with a commitment without knowing their spouse very well, and struggle with fostering friendship and intimacy, the marriage may lead to separation and divorce. Therefore, this research aims to explore the interpersonal relationship dynamics of the newly married arranged marriage couples in Tamil Nadu and to discover the causes for relationship difficulties between couple in initial years and the best practices couples use to address them. The current study uses a qualitative method, incorporating narrative inquiry, with a semi-structured questionnaire for 10 couples (20 participants) as well as a joint interview of the couples. They are college-educated and have been married for 3 years. Thematic analysis revealed that couples navigate differences in various areas such as in personality, emotions, personal freedom, communication, and resolving conflicts between spouse and in-laws. Further, attitudes such as valuing and accepting the other, regarding conflicts as transitory and letting go of their ego helped them to sustain the relationship. These findings come as a tool to for the marital counselors, and psychologists to psycho-educate and to make an appropriate intervention to enhance the quality of relationship and prevent the future difficulties in initial years of marital life.

KEYWORDS:

Navigating differences,
Personality, freedom,
Communication, sustaining
relationship.

1. INTRODUCTION

In many societies, marriage is considered to be the heart and soul of the society (Renier, 2023) and is usually the result of love between a man and woman. However, there are societies, such as India where arranged marriage is still in practice (Banerji, M, 2023). Though semi-arranged and love-cum-arranged marriages have emerged in modern times, traditional arranged marriages continue to be in practice (Das, S, 2024). It is deeply rooted in Indian tradition and cultural values in which parents or extended family members select the marriage candidates (Tahir, 2021). As a result, these young couples struggle to establish their relationship as they are unfamiliar with each other prior to their union (Yadav & Srivastava, 2019). Thus, their married life begins devoid of emotional bond, leaving them vulnerable to frictions and dissatisfaction.

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**Cite this Article: Jayaseelan, J.P., Apuan, V.N. (2026). Exploring Interpersonal Relationship Dynamics of Newlywed Arranged Marital Couples from Tamil Nadu, India: A Narrative Inquiry. International Journal of Social Science and Education Research Studies, 6(2), 131-137*

Globally the number of divorces has increased in recent times but in comparison, India's divorce rate is low at 0.11% of its total population (Noroozi Homayoon, Mohammadreza et al., 2025). Recently Sun News (2024) in Tamil Nadu published a video detailing the growth of divorce case filings in India: In Tamil Nadu in the past decade, 33, 000 divorce cases were filed, a figure three times larger than in previous decades; out of the 33,000 divorces cases, 17,636 were filed in 2024 alone. High divorce cases are seen in the following Tamil Nadu districts: Chennai, Trichy, Salem, and Coimbatore. In Chennai, 5,500 cases were filed in 2024. Mirroring the proportions of the national divorce statistics, 50% of the divorce cases in Tamil Nadu were filed by the 25-35 years old age group, with 60-70% being women. Information collected from lawyers, incidents in new papers, and television reports show that there is a steep increase in the separation and divorce rate in arranged marriages.

The difficulties that underly in arranged marriages seen as couples initially take time and make efforts to resolve conflicts (Kumar et al., 2020) while other reasons being education, financial independence and change of life style (Trivedi et al., 2019). Although there are various reasons that

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cause relationship difficulties, the need to build intimate relationships and bonding is especially necessary for couples in arranged marriages. Furthermore, though research has been done on what strengthens the bonds between a married couple in various countries, such a study has not been conducted for this specific subset of Indian newlywed couples in recent times. This study seeks to explore the relationship dynamics of the Indian couples traversing the first three years of newlywed arranged marriage couples in Tamil Nadu, India, which will definitely enhance the quality of relationships between married couples and significantly contribute to the wellbeing of families at large and the professional world.

An arranged marriage is a union where the partners are selected by their families, they are deeply rooted in tradition, ensuring the compatibility of couples in terms of religion, cast, and social status (Singh et al., 2023). And the spouses share no intimate or emotional bonds prior to the marriage (Yadav et al., 2019). Couples feel dissatisfied with the relationship due to lack of love. So, it seems critical that they learn to build loving relationship in initial years of marriage (Allendorf, 2013). When couple cultivate mutual understanding, they feel marital satisfaction (Raina & Maity, 2018). In addition, positive communication is essential factor for resolving marital conflicts and maintaining a long-lasting, satisfying marital relationship (Girma Shifaw, 2024). In arranged marriage couples are still expected to adhere to binary gender roles which create conflicts (Singh & Pandey, 2023). The positive experience of attachment can protect couples from conflicts that arise in the initial years (Power, 2018). It has been theorized that the concept of empty love, characterized by high commitment with low intimacy and low passion, marks the beginning stages of arranged marriages (Flicker et al., 2019). However, they can still increase the levels of passion over time (Bromfield et al., 2016) and strengthen the trust and love (Kausar, S. et al., 2024). Couples with a healthy self-esteem foster love, intimacy, and understanding in couples much faster.

In Indian society, not much literature focuses on the dynamics of the couple's relationship in the initial years of their marital life in Tamil Nadu, India. Therefore, it is timely and relevant to investigate this issue and explore what affects the relationship dynamics of newlywed arranged marital couples. The study aims to explore the difficulties faced by modern Indian arranged marriage couples in establishing a relationship in their initial years of marital life. The researcher seeks to identify the factors affecting their union and find ways to enhance it. The study aims to address the following questions: What contribute to relationship dynamics among

the newlywed arranged marriage couples in Tamil Nadu, India during their first three years of marriage? How do couples cope with these difficulties and challenges and build a healthy relationship? And how do couples strengthen their relationship quality?

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design. The current study utilized a qualitative method, incorporating narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry began with asking participants to tell their stories in a variety of ways, such as by responding to semi-structured questions or engaging in conversation. The text created from the shared stories, and they are analyzed using different analytic frames (Clandinin & Huber, 2011). In the current study, thematic analysis was used as primary method (Braun, V., & Clarke, V, 2006). The transcription of the interviews was carefully analyzed and coded, leading to key insights and learnings related to couples' relationship, initial adjustment problems, and strategies to work out their marriage and learnings over time.

Participants. The study applied purposive sampling as it aimed to gather data from a group of people with the specific experience of being in an arranged marriage. The participants were heterosexual arranged marriage couples who have been married for three years in Tamil Nadu, India. These are 20 participants (10 couples 10 men and 10 women) have college-level education.

Data Collection the data collection process began by looking out for couples from referrals of family friends and parish priests from different parts of the state of Tamil Nadu. *Procedure.* Prior to the interview, the researcher-built rapport with the participants and explained the objectives of the study and the data gathering process. During the data gathering the participants' socio-demographic data was collected. Verbally and through the informed consent form received for transcription, audio recording and the confidentiality was assured. Pseudo names were used and the data were stored securely and it is available only to the researcher. Strict ethical norms were followed to protect the privacy, dignity, rights of the participants and ensured to address any emotional disturbances that could arise in the interview. It was mentioned that they are free to withdraw from the study at any point they wish. The interviews were done after obtaining the signed informed consent forms from the participants. The researcher conducted semi-structured in-person interviews with the participants, individually and together as couple. Researcher used a socio-demographic questionnaire and a semi-structured interview questionnaire.

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The profile of the ten couples is summarized in Table 1. below, with pseudonyms used to protect their identities.

Table 1. Participants Profile Summary

Name	Age	Years of Marriage	Name	Age	Years of Marriage
Couple 1 Harish (Husband) Dorathy (Wife)	36 35	3	Couple 6 Jerome (husband) Helen (Wife)	34 29	3
Couple 2 Ravi (Husband) Shalini (Wife)	45 35	3	Couple 7 Arul (Husband) Raveena (Wife)	29 27	1
Couple 3 Raj (Husband) Lilly (Wife)	27 25	1.4yrs	Couple 8 Irvin (Husband) Stella (Wife)	33 27	1.5yrs
Couple 4 Lawrence (Husband) Jancy (Wife)	47 48	2	Couple 9 Eugine (Husband) Princy (Wife)	42 37	3
Couple 5 Christopher (Husband) Jency (Wife)	37 30	3	Couple 10 Prince (Husband) Soumi (Wife)	28 26	1

Data Analysis. The data analysis was guided by the narrative inquiry which focus on the stories and experiences of the people (Clendenin and Connelly,2000). *Initial Transcription:* all audio-recorded interviews were transcribed into verbatim to maintain the original nature of the content. *Contextualization:* the narratives were contextualized within Clendenin and Connelly’s three aspects of temporality, place and sociality to understand the personal, physical, contextual, cultural historical dimension of their experience. *Narrative Construction:* For each participant, the narrative account was written with using a pseudo names. This comprises of arranging their stories into thematic outlines, which helped to detect the repeating patters of experiences, insights, perspectives and learnings. *Identifying of Narrative Threads:* These individual narratives then analysed to identify connecting themes or the narrative threads that reflect in other stories. This part was written searching for similar themes in couple experiences of relationship, conflicts and resolving methods. *Interpretive account:* Finally, the interpretative account was written to give a meaning to the collective experiences of the couples. The ethical responsibilities such as privacy, confidentiality and informed consent were maintained by the researcher and remained attentive to the unfolding of the experiences of the client whether there are ethical issues or need for intervention.

Throughout the analysis reflecting on the transcription, listening the recordings, getting in touch researcher’s lived experiences facilitated the analysis to be closer to the experience of the participants.

Methodological Integrity. To make sure the validity and the integrity of the research various measures were taken. The members assured of confidentiality, remained faithful to the text that is participants experiences, anonymity and

pseudo-names were maintained. The coherence was observed in research questions, narrative inquiry designed, data generation all these were aligned in line with the temporality, sociality and place. Further, the researcher used the reflexivity, constantly reflecting the experience of the client and removing the biases, cultural, religious and gender influences and documented the insights and learning enhancing the quality and rigor of the analysis. The constant critical feedback from the guide also contributed the overall integrity of the methodology and interpretation.

3. RESULTS

The narratives and the personal experiences of the newly married couples in the zone of Tamil Nadu, India reveal multifaceted accepts of couple relationship dynamics involved in the initial year of forming their couple relationship. Five resonant themes were highlighted from the narratives shared by the participants which show this process is multilayered and complex reality involving intersecting journey in personal, interpersonal and inter-familiar and spiritual realms.

3.1 Resonant Themes1: Social system rooted in Indian culture and context and belief in elders’ goodwill.

In Indian context the arranged marriage is very much embedded with culture and context. Despite emergence of other forms of marriage, still the arranged marriage plays a major role in marital process and all other ways of marriage is seen as something alien to the culture and society. This is due to various reasons such as upholding the tradition, heritage, family values, caste system, culture and customs of the particular society. It is a practice in the Indian society that any kind of major decision are taken by the parents or elders

are respected. Participant Dorathy's states 'for me choosing the match is done by the family, but I felt supported of the family in choosing the partner'. Another participant Rani says, 'I believed whatever parents decided will be good and trusted in parents' decision making'. These statements reflect the respect and the trust they place in the good will of the parents and elders. In a way, this provides couples with sense of security and safety in choosing a partner and making an important life transition in their life.

3.2 Resonant Thread 2: Commitment to long-term relationship: self-discovery and mutual respect. In arranged marriage the relationship dynamics begins with the strong sense of commitment backed up by the approval of families, society and religious entities. This offers a safe space to initiate marital relationship although the intimacy and bonding is yet to bloom. The narratives of the couples interviewed reveal that they have the task of making the relationship work from the start of their marital life. Ravi states 'we started to talk with each other, regarding likes and dislikes, and felt they are to some extent compatible with each other'. This reveals they spent time with each other to listen to the stories of each other and it helped them to understand each other. In narratives shared by Lawrence and Jancy where they say, 'when husband is angry, wife has to be calm and when wife is little bit dominant, husband has to be calm. if it doesn't happen then there will not be peace in the relationship. The experience show that couples needed to discover each other's differences gradually understanding the emotional nature of each one. Couples acknowledge that establishing a lasting relationship is a journey of struggle and discovering oneself and each other's world, learning to accept and respect the other while finding a way of journeying together in marital life and it does not happen all on a sudden but takes time.

3.3 Resonant Thread 3: Growth in Intimacy, love and self-esteem is expressed in shared decision making, gender roles and managing expectation. In arranged marriages, the process of love and intimacy is gradual. Rober Sternberg in triangular theory of love proposes three components of love as intimacy, passion and commitment. Unlike other forms of marriage, in arranged marriage it does not follow the proposed order but it starts with couple commitment and over time they develop passion, a romantic love and intimacy (Eleanor Myers, 2023). Newly married couples initially feel they are husband and wife and take up house hold responsibility out of commitment not as an expression of love and intimacy. The process of growing in intimacy starts after the marriage and the duration depends on how much time they spend together. Ravi, says we take a walk outside, moments we eat other, chat over phone and all of these helped us to build relationship'. Harish says, 'I give gifts to express my love to my wife'. Dorathy says, 'I express my love through serving my husband'.

The narration of the participants reveals that those who took time to spend time to be together and initiated love were able to build the love and intimacy quickly. Couples also felt they grew up in intimacy when their self-esteem was boosted by their partner, they felt loved and in turn expressed their love towards their partner. This reflected in the way they decided and took up responsibility, treating each other with equality and regulating their expectation this led them to growth in intimacy.

3.4 Resonant Thread 4: The role of negotiation through communication and resolving conflicts: between couple and in-laws, personalities, parenting, space for personal freedom. In the initial phase of Couples relationship, the ability to share openly about their feelings, wants and desires, likes and dislikes are crucial factors in establishing relationship. Invariably, all the participant had difficulties in understanding their partner's personality, emotions, habits and nature initially. There were personalities of opposite nature like introvert and extravert, emotions such as one being reactive and other being calm in nature. As it is noted in the narration of Harish and Dorathy they said, 'Emotionally my wife is sensitive and I am of a calm type. I slowly understood her nature, accepted her and things have changed in our relationship and communication'. From their experience it is clear that the negotiation and communication play a vital role in understanding each other in the initial phase. In couples who have children, parenting is one area of conflict where they need to negotiate and come to terms with parenting. Another area being negotiating personal freedom. Lilly says, 'I changed the way I dress, I used to wear casuals, but my husband does not allow it, I felt he is restricting my freedom'. In her experience although her husband gives her freedom, still there is restriction on these areas which needs negotiation. The intrusion of in-laws into the couple lives one of inevitable issues the young couple face especially in Tamil Nadu. In order to overcome conflict with in-laws, Christopher, Kannan, Rani expressed that they negotiated and have agreed upon keeping the matters pertaining to couples within themselves and this has been very effective to overcome in-laws' issues. They all acknowledge for resolving above mentioned issues the communication and negotiation was effective and affirm that it is an ongoing process.

3.5 Resonant Thread 5: Significant realizations of the couple in their pursuit of happiness; For long term and sustaining couple relationship dynamics.

Couples expressed remarkable insights for sustain long-term relationship. They expressed respect and value and accepting other as they are, balancing work and life as important elements of sustaining relationship. Harish mentioned, 'I never bring work to my home'. And Raj mentioned, 'I don't discuss the work matters at home'. They all reiterated caring for the family is central of happy marital life. In the couple's joint reflection, they became aware of

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their ability to handle emotions, communication and considering problems are temporary is vital for happiness. As Lawrence and Jancy mentioned 'We felt difficult to get along, but slowly both of us shared about our upbringing and it helped us to understand and accept each other'. They stated that this perspective is vital for the couples to establish a long-term relationship. Couples who are successful in their relationship attribute the deep attachment and bonding to their long term-relationship. Ravi attributes the deep attachment and special bonding they have with each other as the cause for stability in relationship.' All the participants noted recourse to the spiritual values such as letting go and surrounding to God is vital for long-term happy marital relationship.

4. CONCLUSION

In the recent times in the India, particularly in the state of Tamil Nadu we see the newly married couples have relationship struggles with their partners in the initial years leading to increased cases of separation and divorce. Therefore, the study intended to explore what contributes to the relationship conflict? and how does couple cope and build their relationship? and how they strengthen their relationship? The findings reveal that differences in personality, emotions, kind of expectation, the way they communicate, ability to resolve couples and in-laws' conflicts play a major role in building relationship in the initial years. The research discovers respecting each other, considering that problems are not permanent, accepting the other as they are and letting go of ego and surrendering to God are some of the factors which fosters long term relationship stability. It reveals that being prepared to handle differences and ability to resolve conflict through negotiation and communication is crucial in establishing long term relationship. Therefore, failures in this regard will eventually lead to separation and divorce. The research findings help us to understand what's going on in the relationship dynamics of the newly married couple and make necessary intervention. This research is a great contribution to the professionals who are working with the marital couples, and to enhance the wellbeing of the family. This study has been done only on couples from different parts of Tamil Nadu; it can be further explored in different region of India.

5. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The research aims to study newlywed arranged marriage couples in Tamil Nadu, India and their relationship dynamics during the first three years of marital life. Specifically, the participants are heterosexual arranged marriage couples who have been married for three years only and who have encountered difficulties in their relationship during that period. This study will examine the experiences of these ten couples as they build their relationships and what conflicts arose when they encountered their spouses. It will not focus

on their family of origin, extended families and how they were parented.

This research is not aimed to generate any kind of financial benefit for the researcher or the people involved in it.

6. PRACTICAL VALUE OF THE PAPER

The paper offers valuable insights to the understanding of the current situation of the newly arranged marriage couple dynamics in Tamil Nadu, India. The findings suggest multiple areas where couples need to navigate in to marital relationship. The research highlights the importance of communication, negotiation and acceptance of the other as they are, seeing the problem as transitory and letting go of ego for building and sustaining relationship.

For marriage counselors this study will give them an understanding of the causes of misunderstanding in the initial stage in arranged marriage couples. This will serve as a guideline for them to animate young couples through couple enrichment programs.

For the youth animators this study would be helpful in conducting pre-marital programs and relationship skill programs training programs.

Since this research offers some of the concrete ways of resolving conflicts from a psycho-spiritual dimension, it would be helpful for those counselling professional who incorporate psycho-spiritual approach in their intervention.

These insights will enhance the quality of service provided by the community and family welfare workers in Tamil Nadu, facilitating them to understand the present youngsters and to have a targeted approach in their building relationship in communities and families.

7. DIRECTION FOR THE FUTURE RESEARCH

The study is done mainly on the newly married couples of first three years. So, in future the years of marriage can be extended and could be done on different period of time like ten years and fifteen years to explore the dynamics of the marital couples. This study is done only on the educated and urban couples; in the future it can be done in rural areas as well. A comparative study between rural and educated couples can be done. The study is done focusing only in one state of India that is Tamil Nadu, this study can be done comprising different state. The study focuses on the interpersonal relationship dynamics. It does not focus on any specific problem. Future research can be done on choosing some specific issues of the couple and explore it further.

8. DECLARATION OF NON-COMPLIANCE

The author of this article declared no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship and publication of this article.

9. ETHICAL APPRAOVAL

All the procedures in this study were done following the ethical standards of the research and Ethical Committee of Miriam College. All the research involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards, consent forms were obtained from all the participants in the research before data collection.

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