

## Marital Experiences in the Empty Nest Stage: Marital Satisfaction and Dissatisfaction \*

Victoria Eugenia Cabrera-García <sup>§</sup>  
Cheryl Andrea Morales Acevedo <sup>‡</sup>  
Irma Beatriz Guarín Ortega <sup>¶</sup>

### Abstract

At the beginning of marital relationships, couples often experience high levels of satisfaction. However, as they dedicate themselves to raising children and managing work commitments, marital satisfaction may take a secondary role, leading to a decline over the years. This study aimed to analyze the experiences of marital satisfaction during the empty nest stage among Colombian couples. Initially, a quantitative methodology was used, followed by a qualitative phase grounded in phenomenological tradition, which incorporated dialogical, participatory, and contextualized strategies with a total of 17 participants: 9 women and 8 men.

The results illustrate, through discursive elements, how some marriages approach this stage with either high or low levels of marital satisfaction. Both satisfied and dissatisfied individuals generally do not express affection and admiration verbally; instead, they show it through actions. Dissatisfied men desire that their wives seek their attention, but the women do not do so, and they perceive that their children were the center of their aspirations, making it feel pointless to continue together. Dissatisfied women view the empty nest as an opportunity to focus on themselves now that the children are no longer present, and they believe that both parties should win in a disagreement. Satisfied men and women, over the years, have learned to manage conflict more calmly, and during this stage, they are more accepting of the influence of their spouses.

It is concluded that this stage of the life cycle involves several learnings and adjustments in marital relationships. In satisfied couples, the awareness of valuing and caring for one another is emphasized, as they are alone together, facing this new experience. In dissatisfied couples, there is an important sense of being together, yet without a clear purpose, as they acknowledge having focused their marital life on their children, and it has not been easy to reconnect as a couple in this stage. These results invite reflection on the marital experiences of men and women after several years of marriage, aiming to guide preventive actions that contribute to the stability of these relationships.

### Keywords

Marital satisfaction, marital dissatisfaction, spouses, children, empty nest syndrome.

\* Research article. Result of the study on marital stability and satisfaction in the context of the empty nest, Universidad de la Sabana. This English version is a translation generated through AI and human revision.

<sup>§</sup> Doctora en Educación y psicología de la Universidad de Navarra, España. Profesora, Universidad de La Sabana, Bogotá, Colombia.  
E-mail: [victoria.cabrera@unisabana.edu.co](mailto:victoria.cabrera@unisabana.edu.co) ORCID: 0000-0001-8907-5655

<sup>‡</sup> Magíster en Asesoría familiar y gestión de programas para la familia de la Universidad de la Sabana, Bogotá, Colombia.  
E-mail: [cherylmoac@unisabana.edu.co](mailto:cherylmoac@unisabana.edu.co) ORCID: 0000-0003-1402-8955

<sup>¶</sup> Magíster en Asesoría familiar y gestión de programas para la familia de la Universidad de la Sabana, Bogotá, Colombia.  
E-mail: [irma.guarin@unisabana.edu.co](mailto:irma.guarin@unisabana.edu.co) ORCID: 0000-0001-7637-9051

### How to cite:

Cabrera-García, V. E., Morales Acevedo, C. A., & Guarín Ortega, I. B. (2023). Marital experiences in the empty nest stage: Marital satisfaction and dissatisfaction. *Civilizar*, 23(44), e20230102. <https://doi.org/10.22518/jour.ccsch/20230102>

## Introduction

Family relationships, like each individual, undergo transitions over the years that are part of the family life cycle. "Each transition requires the family to change, re-establish priorities, and reorganize to face the challenges of the new stage in the life cycle" (Gerson, 1995, p. 91). Carter and McGoldrick (2005) classify the stages of the family life cycle as follows: young adult singles, union of families through marriage, families with young children, families with adolescents, launching children and moving on, and families in old age. Each of these stages requires adjustments to continue the family's natural development. According to Gerson (1995), these transition processes often give rise to the greatest family crises; these transitions are considered "typical life stressors." Specifically, regarding the crises they face, spouses at the beginning of their marital relationship present high levels of satisfaction. However, due to dedication to raising children and work commitments, this can take a backseat and, therefore, decrease over the years of marriage.

This decline in satisfaction can lead to the dissolution of the marital relationship and, subsequently, divorce. According to the Colombian Superintendence of Notaries and Registration, this phenomenon has increased in recent years; the number of divorces in 2021 was 26,519, reflecting an increase of nearly 7,000 divorces compared to the previous year, the highest figure in the last 10 years (Statista, 2023). Furthermore, divorces do not only occur in the early years of marriage; they are increasingly occurring after many years of cohabitation, which can coincide with the empty nest stage for the spouses. In this context, the objective of this study was to analyze the experiences of marital satisfaction during the empty nest stage of Colombian individuals in marital unions. The goal was to identify the phenomenological description of the significant experience of individuals in marital unions during the empty nest stage as a whole, which will help understand the idiosyncratic ways of experiencing the empty nest process, in contrast to or in agreement with the theory of Gottman and Gottman (2013).

One of the stages of the life cycle that attracts particular interest in this research is the "launching children and moving on" stage (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005), also referred to in the literature as the empty nest stage. Sartori and Zilberman (2009) state that, according to the theoretical background, there are two terms associated with this life cycle stage: the empty nest and the empty nest syndrome. The empty nest refers to the natural emotional period parents experience when their children leave home (Sartori & Zilberman, 2009), whereas the empty nest syndrome is related to the different symptoms or crises parents face due to their children leaving the home. Wang et al. (2020) affirm that "due to the lack of affection and spiritual comfort from their children, couples in the empty nest are more likely to develop the syndrome, triggering negative emotions and psychological problems such as sadness and restlessness" (p. 153).

According to Carter and McGoldrick (2005), this stage requires changes in the family's state to facilitate its natural development, such as renegotiating the marital system as a dyad and developing adult-to-adult relationships between adult children and their parents. Meanwhile, in the marital relationship dynamics, a decline in marital satisfaction and commitment can occur (Carter & McGoldrick, 2005), requiring a dyadic adjustment to maintain the relationship stable (Cuervo, 2013; Nina-Estrella, 2011; Karney et al., 1999). In this sense, it is justified to delve into the marital relationship in the context of the empty nest to understand how Colombian men and women experience their marital relationships during this stage, according to the theoretical proposal of Gottman and Gottman (2013). While the phenomenon has been widely studied in different countries, there is limited literature on this topic in Colombia. Thus, the analytical focus is on the perceptions and experiences reported by couples who

undergo the transition of the empty nest stage and how they have continued their marital lives.

According to Pérez and Estrada (2006), although some studies suggest that the birth of children is a cause of decreased marital satisfaction, this satisfaction decreases even more when the children leave home, as it can create distress in the couple when they perceive a contradiction between the achievements of raising their children and the departure of those same children. In this regard, Zepeda and Sánchez (2021), Sánchez (2009), and Beytía (2017) explain that in the midst of this situation, the support and trust between partners is related to higher marital satisfaction. Brisini et al. (2018) affirm that transitions in marital relationship lead to changes in the expectations and assumptions about the relationship and the interdependence between the partners.

On the other hand, Bouchard (2018) states that for most couples, the empty nest is a stage of marital renewal, "since they gain more time to dedicate to the relationship" (p. 36). In women, an increase in enjoyment of time spent together has been observed, as home life can become more peaceful when the children have left, leading to an increase in the quality of marital interaction.

On the other hand, the departure of children from the home can also generate negative emotions for the couple. Bouchard (2018) acknowledges that the empty nest can be a scenario that increases the likelihood of divorce for some couples. In this sense, Johnson et al. (2020) argue that while the empty nest does not predict the possibility of a "gray divorce" (divorce in later adulthood), it is a fact that when children leave the home, the couple may experience a reduced feeling of being trapped in a relationship. The empty nest stage presents significant challenges for couples, demanding that spouses contribute more of themselves to successfully navigate this phase. De Miguel (2015) explains that the couple must assume "a very particular task, a reconnection with each other, a marital rediscovery, and a renegotiation of the relationship, now free of the parental role" (p. 10).

Lucarelli and Wittner (2019) argue that the resources a couple possesses, such as commitment, a sense of humor, and affection, will allow them to navigate this stage and reach a new stability without breaking apart along the way, maintaining marital satisfaction as high as possible, and with it, their physical and mental health (p. 66). According to Costa et al. (2020), the empty nest period can be a new opportunity to rebuild the relationship, revive previous goals, redefine roles, and include others; couples with independent children have more time for each other and to develop new activities together.

Kulik (2016) states that by the end of middle age, people attribute greater importance to their role as spouses, as "satisfaction with the role of spouse in late adulthood is related to a sense of well-being and a sense of life among men and women" (p. 147). Acevedo et al. (2007) affirm that "marital satisfaction is a subjective evaluation of the relationship by the couple" (p. 90), meaning the review a person makes of their relationship and spouse. According to Cabrera (2016), marital satisfaction is defined as a representation of the interpersonal bond in marriage, where the behaviors, affections, and emotions of the individuals reflect the existing commitment and serve as an indicator of happiness in the marriage. For Bastida (2017), marital satisfaction is a central component for the permanence in a romantic relationship.

In a study, Gottman and Schwartz (2008) referred to "masters of relationships" as happy and stable couples, and to unhappy couples, whether stable or unstable, as "disasters of relationships." From this finding, the "sound relationship house" theory emerged, which

aims to "develop methods to prevent relationship collapse and help couples" (Gottman & Gottman, 2013, p. 93). This study considered this theory as an epistemological perspective and as the basis for analyzing the results.

Gottman and Schwartz (2008) and Gottman and Gottman (2013) propose predictors of marital satisfaction and divorce due to marital dissatisfaction. Predictors of marital satisfaction include building love maps, cultivating affection and admiration, turning toward each other, a positive perspective, managing conflict, making life dreams come true, and creating a sense of transcendence. Predictors of divorce or continued misery include: more negativity than positivity; escalation of negative affect; withdrawing; turning against each other; failed attempts at repair; dismissing negative feelings; diffuse physiological arousal; resistance of men to accept the influence of their wives. This theory refers to a house with seven levels: the first three represent the foundation of the house, symbolizing the friendship relationship (the couple needs to learn to be good friends); the next two levels work on conflict management, and the last two address the shared sense of transcendence with the partner (Gottman & Gottman, 2013).

## Methodology

Initially, a quantitative study was conducted in order to measure the marital satisfaction level of the participants using Barrera's (2002) instrument. Based on the results, two participant groups were established. The second stage was qualitative, cross-sectional, discursive, and comparative between men and women, following the phenomenological tradition, which assumes a critical stance. Therefore, this research recovers, through a dialogue of knowledge, the life experiences of the participating couples, delving into their realities, lives, and experiences within their marital relationship during the empty nest phase. The qualitative study is defined as "intensive research on a very small scale, in which the everyday experience of people and their communities in different times and spaces is explored" (Cadena et al., 2017, p. 1607).

The phenomenological tradition aims to describe the meaning of lived experiences regarding a concept or phenomenon, thus transforming individual experiences into a description of the essence of such a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In a phenomenological research study, the procedures are followed to uncover the essence of the meaning of the events experienced by individuals from the depth of their personal perception (Creswell, 1997). In phenomenology, the researcher transcends or suspends prior knowledge and experience to understand a phenomenon on a deeper level, attempting to approach life experiences with a sense of "novelty" to reveal enriched data. Furthermore, Bolio (2012) stated that "the sense and meaning of the world and its surroundings is a subjective formation, in which the world matters to the one who experiences it and questions how reason has operated and applied". It is a process in which beliefs, feelings, and perceptions are explored in order to be more receptive to the phenomenon being studied and faithful to its description. Therefore, this research seeks to recognize and highlight the marital satisfaction and dissatisfaction experiences of married individuals living through the empty nest phase.

## Participants

A convenience sample was formed, meaning participants who met the previously mentioned inclusion criteria were selected through a snowball technique. This technique involves identifying potential participants through the social networks of the research team and the participants themselves, who meet the inclusion criteria (Hernández et al., 2010). The sample

consisted of 17 people, 8 men and 9 women, all Colombians aged between 57 and 72 years. They were married (6 in civil unions and 11 in religious unions) and were living through the empty nest phase at the time of the study. Participation in the study was independent of the couple's decision, meaning one member of the couple could participate even if the other did not wish to. Initially, five people were recruited, and as others were progressively added, the data reached saturation, as no new contributions emerged from the participants' narratives. Ultimately, 17 individuals were interviewed. The participants were organized into two groups: 1) those with a satisfactory marital relationship (10) and 2) those with an unsatisfactory marital relationship (7).

## Instruments

The marital satisfaction scale consists of eight questions that measure satisfaction with the relationship through ratings such as: "My relationship is as pleasant as I expected," using a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always) ( $\alpha = 0.88$ ).

An in-depth interview was also designed based on the previously identified analysis categories, according to the postulates of the "house of a solid relationship" theory by John and Julie Gottman (2013), which was evaluated and approved by two judges. The analysis categories and their descriptors were adapted as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

[See] [THE SOUND RELATIONSHIP HOUSE](#)

Source: Gottman & Gottman (2013, p. 97).

## Procedure

Participants previously signed informed consent forms and were assured of the anonymous and confidential use of their information. Some interviews were conducted virtually via the Zoom platform, while others were held in person, adhering to all biosafety protocols to prevent the spread of Covid-19. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Atlas.ti v.9 software. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of the institution supporting the research, and the suggested adjustments from this committee were implemented. The interview questions were developed based on the definitions of the components of a strong relationship house, as outlined by Gottman and Gottman.

To analyze the information, an axial coding process was conducted, which involves relating or associating categories with subcategories. This coding was done around the central axis of a main category, which was linked with other categories based on their properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

## Results

Prior to the fieldwork for the in-depth interviews, and in order to form the two participant groups, a questionnaire was administered to assess marital satisfaction (Barrera, 2002). Those who scored above the mean ( $m = 27.29$ ) were placed in the satisfied marriages group, while those who scored below the mean were placed in the dissatisfied marriages group (Table 1).

Table 1  
Marital Satisfaction of Participants (Score)

Participant		Score
Dissatisfied	Men 1	17
	Men 2	21
	Men 3	19
	Women 1	15
	Women 2	18
	Women 3	22
	Women 4	15
Satisfied	Women 1	35
	Women 2	31
	Women 3	29
	Women 4	34
	Women 5	37
	Men 1	37
	Men 2	33
	Men 3	29
	Men 4	35
	Men 5	37

Source: Own elaboration.

The categories deemed most pertinent, as they were most frequently referenced by the participants, were organized into two groups: 1) predictors of marital stability and satisfaction: cultivating admiration and affection, approaching the other, managing conflict, and creating a sense of transcendence, and 2) predictors of divorce or dissatisfaction: failures in repair attempts, diffuse physiological arousal, and men's failure to accept their wives' influence.

### Predictors of Marital Satisfaction

For the purposes of this research, four of the seven levels of the "solid relationship house" theory were considered, as they are directly related to the experience of the empty nest and marital satisfaction (Table 2).

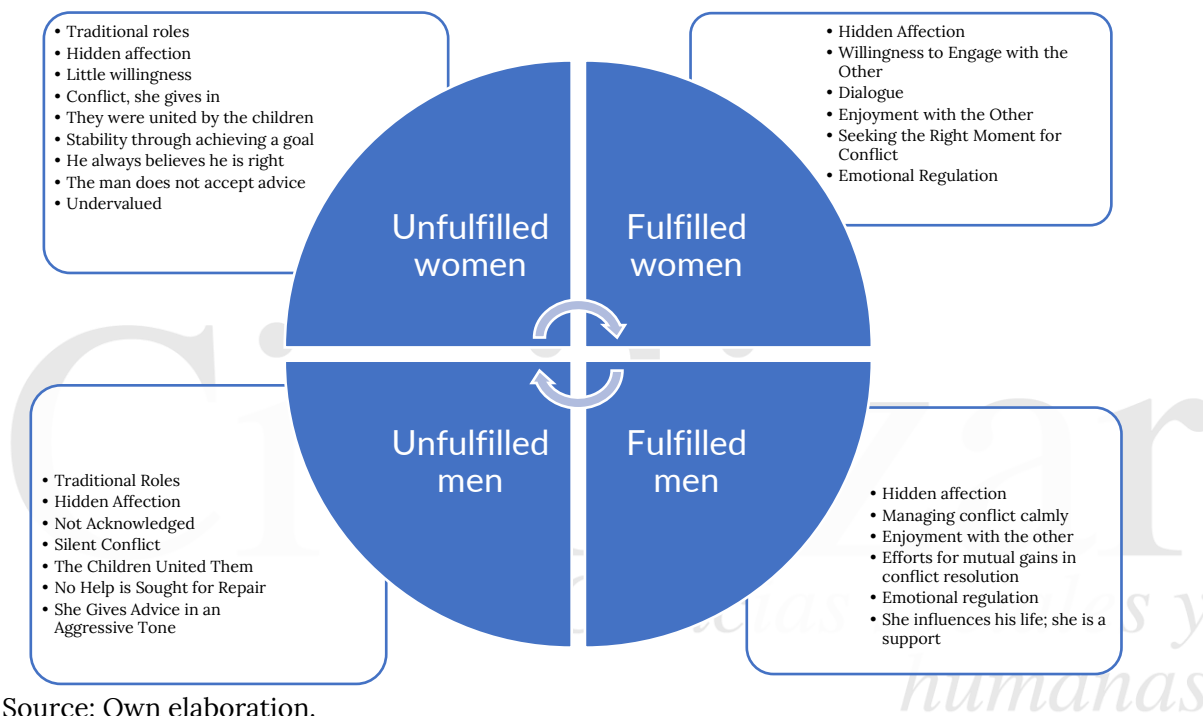
Table 2  
Analysis of Narratives and Their Meanings

Category	Subcategory	Related Narratives	Meaning Code
Predictors of Marital Satisfaction	Cultivating Affection and Admiration	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Traditional Gender Roles Assigned Culturally</li> <li>Affection and Warmth are Thought but Not Expressed</li> </ul>
	Approaching the Other	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Willingness to Be with the Partner (Satisfied)</li> <li>Lack of Willingness to Pay Attention to the Partner (Dissatisfied)</li> </ul>
	Managing Conflict	6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conflict is Managed Calmly, Postponed, or Avoided</li> <li>Avoidance Results in Unresolved Conflict and Dissatisfaction</li> </ul>
	Creating a Sense of Transcendence	12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Children United Them, Raising Them—What Now?</li> <li>Enjoyment of Being Together, Personal Activities Become Relevant</li> </ul>

Predictors of Marital Dissatisfaction	Failure in Repair Attempts	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Relationship Should Be Win-Win.</li> <li>• Not Taking the Blame.</li> </ul>
	Diffuse Physiological Arousal	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional Regulation.</li> <li>• Desire for Revenge.</li> </ul>
	Men's Failure to Accept Their Wives' Influence	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acceptance of Support and Positive Influence.</li> <li>• Resistance to Partner's Support.</li> </ul>

Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 2  
 Relationship of Participants with Identified Attitudes



Source: Own elaboration.

**Cultivating Affection and Admiration.** According to Gottman and Schwartz (2008), there are two key aspects in nurturing affection, respect, and admiration within a relationship: the first is related to the mental habit of scanning one's partner to find reasons to admire, appreciate, and take pride in them; the second aspect corresponds to expressions of appreciation and admiration, which should be verbalized or non-verbalized, but never left unexpressed. In other words, "build a system of affection and admiration by expressing love and respect in small daily moments" (p. 140). For satisfied men, it is easy to recognize that they frequently feel admiration towards their partners for being serious, responsible, good homemakers, among other characteristics:

"Well, there are many things, for example 'M.', she is a homemaker like few others, really, because she is very meticulous with the house, with the chores, she's an excellent cook, she cooks very well, spectacular." (Satisfied man, 60 years old)

For their part, women who feel satisfied in their marriages express that cultivating admiration and affection for their partner is understood through the respect and admiration they experience towards them in the relationship. They recognize their partners' responsibility at home, their intelligence, and above all, their unconditional support when they need it:

"I thank God infinitely because J. F. is an absolutely responsible man." (Satisfied woman, 57 years old)

"As a couple, in every aspect, the support, the unity, the companionship, the fact that we always share everything, that we're always together." (Satisfied woman, 59 years old)

On the other hand, when interviewing men and women dissatisfied with their marital relationships, it can be observed that the men still admire their wives for their abilities, perseverance, commitment, and also for their physical appearance. Despite dissatisfaction with marriage, they recognize positive aspects in their partners:

"Well, uh, about her, uh, her perseverance, her boldness, her problem-solving ability, and always very proactive." (Dissatisfied man, 62 years old)

"She's beautiful, she's a beautiful woman. Her body, I really like her body. Despite her age, she looks young, I'm proud of that." (Dissatisfied man, 64 years old)

In the case of dissatisfied women, their admiration for their husbands mainly centers on these aspects: responsibility, taking care of family matters and household tasks, and being attentive to what is needed:

"Well, uh, I think, uh, I'm sure... My husband has a great quality, which is absolute and total responsibility for everything that involves the family, and he's always on top of fixing the things around the house... He fixes everything that breaks when it's needed." (Dissatisfied woman, 62 years old)

It is also evident that for both groups of couples (satisfied and dissatisfied), verbal expressions of affection and admiration do not seem to be a relevant element during this stage of the empty nest. The people interviewed express that they use other ways to show affection, rarely doing so verbally.

"I'm not one for many words, but I'm more about actions, so being considerate with her... that's why I try to make sure if she needs someone to help her, then that person comes and helps with whatever she needs." (Satisfied man, 60 years old)

"One thing is the positive side... but then comes the internal confrontations, and suddenly one was no longer saying it at this stage, so there wasn't a real acknowledgment, but one knew inside that she was a great element, but didn't make a clear acknowledgment of it." (Dissatisfied man, 62 years old)

"In the first five years of marriage, I used to tell her, but after that, I lost the habit of saying it." (Dissatisfied woman, 56 years old)

"I don't say it with words, I feel it, I think it, but I don't say it." (Dissatisfied man, 64 years old)

As seen in these narratives, admiration for the partner centers around traditionally expected roles for men and women, related to responsibility in household matters and physical beauty. Additionally, work capacity and perseverance are recognized. On the other hand, the participants do not consider verbal expressions of affection to be important.

**Approaching the Other.** People may make requests to ask for attention, conversation, and moments of humor, affection, warmth, empathy, and support. When positive responses are received to such requests, the couple may experience "moments of emotional connection that are like deposits made into a bank account" (Gottman & Gottman, 2013); on the other hand, if a person receives a negative response, that "response can result in a debit from the emotional bank account" (p. 98).



Satisfied men express that they show attention to their wives by listening to them, being available to support them, promptly doing favors they require, and conversing about matters of interest to them:

“What do you need? What can I offer you? What can I do? How can I help?” (Satisfied man, 59 years old)

“Even though she sometimes seems tiring, I always pay attention to her, and... I ask her what she needs when I see her sad.” (Satisfied man, 64 years old)

On the other hand, satisfied women express joy in sharing life with their partners, appreciation for their considerate treatment, and willingness toward their partner; they value the moments they share.

“I like always being ready to do things together, being there for him.” (Satisfied woman, 59 years old)

“When we’re free from daily routine, we love having coffee together, talking about everything, and usually, after 34 years of marriage, the topics repeat, right? Haha, but we don’t mind repeating them.” (Satisfied woman, 57 years old)

Unsatisfied men perceive that their wives hardly ever seek their attention; on the contrary, it is they who look for them. They wish their wives would seek them more and take them into account:

“She hardly asks me for anything, hehe, that’s how I interpret it. Or maybe I don’t interpret it well, if she’s seeking attention, because... I also like it, I need her attention.” (Unsatisfied man, 64 years old)

“Is there a positive reaction from me at this stage? No. Before, it was stronger the fact that I used to demand more from her, that she acknowledged me, I used to care about it more, now I’ve gotten used to her not doing it.” (Unsatisfied man, 60 years old)

In these narratives, some issues related to dissatisfaction in couples can be observed, especially in the empty nest stage. Men agree that, before experiencing the empty nest, even though they had less time, they used to talk more and had more opportunities to share and connect, characteristics associated with a closer and stronger bond:

“The times of warmth give me life, and I feel young again, they make me feel there’s a bond. Because part of what’s happened these last few years is that it seems like the bonds aren’t there anymore. Our bond seemed to be the children.” (Unsatisfied man, 64 years old)

Regarding getting closer to each other, the unsatisfied women interviewed say that when their husbands seek attention, they feel uncomfortable or upset because they feel they do not receive the same in return:

“That has changed a lot, before, without him finishing speaking, I knew what he was going to say, we could almost complete the sentence together, and I’d give him what he wanted, but that has changed a lot, so now my attitude isn’t as willing as before.” (Unsatisfied woman, 60 years old)

**Managing conflict.** Conflict is natural in human relationships, particularly in romantic relationships, so the most important thing is how it is resolved.

During conflicts, relationship experts are kind to each other, soften the conflict's start (including preventive repair), accept each other's influence, calm themselves, repair and reduce conflict conversations, and commit to resolving them. (Gottman & Gottman, 2013, p. 99)

According to this description, satisfied men expressed that, in the early stages of their marriage, they perhaps faced greater difficulties resolving conflicts; there were discourteous attitudes and words, and a higher number of arguments. Nowadays, they tend to resolve conflicts kindly and avoid rude words or shouting:

"No, I think the solution is talking about it, it's better to give it time, because sometimes, for example, we have differences, and she loses her temper, and then I want to stay there, 'well, wait, don't talk to me, let me calm down.'" (Satisfied man, 60 years old)

Likewise, satisfied women consider respect in dealing with their partner to be crucial, opting for silence when they are very upset or leaving the room and returning to the conversation when they are calmer. They say that, over the years, they have learned not to get upset so easily by small things. They believe dialogue is the main tool for solving conflicts:

"Currently, haha, because old age has given us some... after overcoming difficulties like any couple, eh, one of us asks the other to talk when we are calmer." (Satisfied woman, 57 years old)

"And more so now, when it's just the two of us, we sometimes have silly differences, differences in opinions. For example, I want the vase upside down, and he wants it... no, here we have to find a middle ground." (Satisfied woman, 58 years old, emphasis added)

In terms of managing conflicts, unsatisfied men agree that it's preferable to avoid the conflict to avoid having a discussion. They also express that they try to listen, but on many occasions, they seek to attack the other. They also agree that, in conflict management, personal attacks, verbal aggression (not physical but verbal), and raising the tone of voice often occur:

"Remaining silent, not talking, but the conflict is not resolved. In fact, there are tons of issues piled up, that account is high." (Unsatisfied man, 64 years old)

"Yes, she's aggressive, but not in terms of raising our hands, just the tone of voice... the way we used to handle things calmly and kindly has changed, but the tone of voice does change." (Unsatisfied man, 60 years old)

Unsatisfied women express that, most of the time, they are the ones who must give in and approach the other to resolve issues. They generally reveal that their husbands are prouder than they are and have become more stubborn in their positions over time, which increases conflicts:

"Generally, if not always, I'm the one who takes the initiative to talk and clarify things. He's a proud person with few words... so, I usually give in." (Unsatisfied woman, 56 years old)

Another aspect is that conflicts are not resolved at their core, but acts of repair are carried out to make up for the harm caused; the underlying issue is neither discussed nor clarified:

"It was like a reward, like... 'we have a conflict, so I'll invite you to eat,' or 'I'll make you a nice meal,' or 'I'll take you out.' So, no, we didn't talk, which is the ideal thing. We women like to talk, but there was a kind of compensatory expression." (Unsatisfied woman, 56 years old)

**Creating a Sense of Transcendence.** "A relationship is also about building a life together, a life that has a sense of shared purpose and meaning. It's about creating shared meaning in the relationship. People do this in many ways, including creating informal rituals of connection, setting shared goals, and life missions" (Gottman & Gottman, 2013, p. 101). The satisfied men interviewed

for this study report that a relationship is about building a life together and understand this as living a life with shared meaning.

On the one hand, the satisfaction that comes from forming three little people, who they know are good people... and now, what we are living, we aspire to continue having that companionship and that the future will be until the end of our days, together, right? That's the idea. (Satisfied man, 60 years old)

This sense of transcendence includes the creation of shared goals and life projects, supporting each other in the basic roles of life, and agreeing on the meaning of the values and symbols central to each person:

No, absolutely everything, everything you see here, everything we, as a couple, have achieved both emotionally and personally, has been together, absolutely everything... we have taken it step by step, rung by rung, little by little, and along the way, we have achieved both spiritual and material things. I support her, and she has supported me. (Satisfied man, 59 years old)

Furthermore, they understand that it is important to have goals that guide their relationship, and their belief in God has helped them achieve those goals. They consider that what they have built also includes the creation of informal rituals of connection.

My future is her; now that I'm here at home and we're alone... I do housework, we go to mass together, I run errands, I call her, tease her, we go for walks... she's an amazing dancer, sharing absolutely all the experiences with her. Throughout all these years, God has always been present. (Satisfied man, 64 years old)

Satisfied women place great importance on the small details and experiences that allow them to build a life together; this involves giving transcendent meaning to each of the events they share in order to consolidate their relationship, create future goals, and support each other in seeking the well-being of the couple.

We feel that we fulfilled our duty with our son, that we raised a very good human being... living more relaxed, as a couple, we've built a beautiful home, that's what I feel we've built our life together. Now, we seek to be well as a couple and each of us as a person, and for that, we rely on each other. (Satisfied woman, 59 years old)

Dancing with Toño, when he takes me to dance... I start with my eyes closed because I let myself be led by him, and I feel a tranquility and a very beautiful emotion, so I love it. (Satisfied woman, 58 years old)

Regarding the unsatisfied men, it can be observed that they do not identify concrete expressions in which they can evidence this sense of transcendence. They recognize that their children had become the center of their aspirations and that during the empty nest stage, they could not find a reason to stay together:

Building friendship, we were friends, even married, with the kids and everything. Part of that friendship was talking a lot. Then, when we were finally alone, we lost that, and I think it needs to be rebuilt. Personally, I would like my wife to be my friend. (Unsatisfied man, 64 years old)

If I have a conclusion, it's that we dedicated ourselves to the kids, and when we no longer had the kids, then boom [he claps his hands on the table] ... there was nothing. Well, sorry, it's that we didn't build anything for ourselves, it was all about the kids, the kids, the kids. (Unsatisfied man, 64 years old)

As for the unsatisfied women, it is evident that having raised their children is one of the greatest achievements and satisfactions they feel regarding their marital relationship. Some do not

envision their life together with their husbands, and they continue living together more out of habit and comfort than for love.

Well, I would say that the life of the children is like the greatest achievement we had. Building the lives of the children, their profession, their stability. Watching them grow and develop. (Unsatisfied woman, 56 years old)

The sense of continuing would be just to fulfill the goal of growing old together. The truth is, there's no enjoyment left, but if we stay together, it's to fulfill that goal. (Unsatisfied woman, 57 years old)

## Predictors of Divorce or Marital Dissatisfaction

Through the development of their theory, Gottman and Gottman (2013) identified eight predictors of divorce or ongoing misery that are characteristic of dysfunctional couples. The divorce predictors chosen to be addressed in this research, which relate to the experience of the empty nest, are: failure in attempts at repair, diffuse physiological arousal, and men's failure to accept influence from their wives.

**Failure Attempts at Repair.** Conflicts are a natural part of marital relationships. Ideally, couples process and confront them in the best way possible, as communication difficulties become evident over time, and even hurt feelings arise. Some seek to repair the relationship, but when couples fail in that attempt, they move toward divorce (Gottman & Gottman, 2013). For satisfied men, it is important that both partners feel good when resolving conflicts to prevent frustration and resentment, which could lead to divorce:

No, no, I think this has to be that both of us win because when one wins and the other loses, both lose. That's when the relationship starts to erode, resentments begin to form, feelings of frustration arise, and I think that's not the way. The idea is that we both win, because if not, what's the point? (Satisfied man, 60 years old)

In the group of satisfied women, there is a tendency to accept that their contribution is to make the resolution of conflicts work, to try to solve and repair when they have made a mistake. Over time, they have recognized their responsibility in the emergence of conflicts. They do not seek to win at the expense of the other, nor do they express the intention to negotiate or yield so that the other takes advantage:

I prefer, when I'm upset, that they don't talk to me because I say when you're like that, you offend or say something you shouldn't, or it's not the right moment. So, I prefer to let it go and wait for the right moment to tell them. (Satisfied woman, 58 years old)

For unsatisfied men, the failure in repair attempts lies in their lack of firmness, passivity, and letting things go because they are frustrated that their wives always want to be right and assert that they are never wrong:

A lot of the situation we're living now is due to unresolved conflicts from 20 years ago, 15 years ago, 7 years ago... and we didn't seek external help to maintain an image in front of others. (Unsatisfied man, 64 years old)

They also agree that it is easy for them to recognize their responsibility in a conflict, even taking on responsibilities that do not belong to them:

A lot, for me, it's very easy to say: I was wrong. I'm even going to say that... when there's conflict, both sides are involved, so I assume too much responsibility... but I assume it, not convinced that all the responsibility is mine... so I keep it to myself, and it affects me internally. (Unsatisfied man, 64 years old)

On the other hand, the unsatisfied women interviewed recognize that the reasons that have led them to fail many times in attempts at repair are their character, very different views on certain fundamental aspects, and they agree that they have failed and ask for forgiveness or seek ways to make up for the damage caused:

My character, sometimes I'm very rude with him... that's why I prefer to stay quiet. (Unsatisfied woman, 56 years old)

He always wants to win, he wants to dominate the relationship. He always wants to be right. Even though I'm the one who's right. (Unsatisfied woman, 63 years old)

**Diffuse Physiological Arousal.** When a person perceives they are emotionally under attack during a conflict, the body may begin producing adrenaline in anticipation of a fight-or-flight response, which makes it difficult for individuals to process information effectively (Gottman & Gottman, 2013).

Satisfied men express that such feelings are not common in their relationship. The emotions they predominantly experience are associated with wanting the well-being of the other person; likewise, when it comes to cooperation vs. competition, they describe their relationship as characterized by mutual support and help.

Living together means both partners are well... we always want to be okay, to have harmony because that's what this is about; we try not to be led by our emotions because otherwise... that's serious... (Satisfied man, 59 years old).

Similarly, satisfied women tend to remain calm because they recognize that becoming agitated could lead them to make serious mistakes.

No, it's not about us, it's not that one wins; there's no position like, "oh, I won, how great, I beat you," that doesn't exist, here we resolve it, and that's it. I try not to get upset because I might do something foolish. (Satisfied woman, 59 years old).

For dissatisfied men, feeling emotionally attacked during conflicts is a very common experience. They also recognize the physiological arousal they feel, often victimizing themselves, attacking with aggressive words, fleeing, or becoming paralyzed. Some agree that, on many occasions, they give in to avoid conflict, though they are not happy with this "giving in":

I tend to attack her character: "You always think you're right; things always end up going the way you want them to"... I attack her, I'm furious... and on many occasions, we can stay in this difficult situation for up to a week. (Dissatisfied man, 60 years old).

In the case of dissatisfied women, most of them express frequently feeling emotionally attacked by their partners. They claim that their partners always want to be right, which they find exhausting and frustrating. Some mention that the empty-nest phase helped them focus more on themselves, without the responsibility of maintaining an image in front of their children:

In this empty-nest phase, I've learned to think more about myself, I've learned to let each person take responsibility for their own situations and face the consequences of their mistakes and decisions. I fell into a depression, a sadness where I realized: What have I done with my life? I've only cared for others and neglected myself, I've felt very sad. (Dissatisfied woman, 52 years old).

**Men's Failure to Accept the Influence of Their Wives.** In a relationship, it is necessary to be able to accept the influence of the other person on certain things that the partner wants. Gottman and Krokoff (2000) have successfully identified, with a prediction accuracy of 90%, factors that strengthen relationships, keeping them stable and vibrant in stressful times like the present. For

the group of satisfied men, accepting their wives' influence is easy; they understand that in a relationship, it is important to be able to accept the influence of their partner on some aspects they want. They believe that what their wives think is relevant, and they value their wives' opinions about their work, family life, and personal appearance.

In my case, I have received a lot of support in everything, absolutely everything. She has been a strength and an incredible lever for me. I believe that without her, I wouldn't have been able to achieve or get as far as I have, and it is also thanks to her strength, support, and push. (Satisfied man, 59 years old)

For dissatisfied men, it is difficult to recognize and accept the influence of their wives. They may accept some advice, for example, regarding physical appearance or work-related matters, but when it comes to major decisions, they neither listen to nor value their wives' opinions. This generates in them a feeling of not being important in their husbands' lives or not being valued:

When it comes to work or his decisions, he always says: 'Don't interfere, this is my matter, and I'll resolve it.' (Dissatisfied woman, 56 years old)

This aspect highlights precisely that men in unsatisfactory marriages often ignore the advice or recommendations of their wives, either out of stubbornness, contrariness, or because they dislike the tone of voice with which they are given the advice. They prefer to avoid listening and do things as they see fit.

Even though I know deep down that she is right and that her advice has been crucial in other stages, not now, I refuse to take that advice. (Dissatisfied man, 60 years old)

## Discussion

This study aimed to understand the marital relationship experiences of men and women during the empty nest stage, based on the theoretical proposal of Gottman and Gottman (2013), classifying them into satisfied and dissatisfied marriages. The results found generally align with those of Cabrera (2016), who stated that couples in a satisfying relationship exhibit positive and intentional behaviors, affections, and emotions towards each other as a reflection of their satisfaction, despite the passage of time and the departure of children.

While marital satisfaction, as stated by Bastida et al. (2017), is the main predictor of relationship stability, some individuals in unsatisfactory relationships do not intend to leave them; due to habit and custom, they still maintain expectations and hope that things can improve. Others see no point in continuing and wish to abandon the relationship.

As explained by Lucarelli and Wittner (2019), each stage of life should be lived according to the possibilities the couple has; a new reorganization of resources must take place, whether these are positive, such as expressions of affection and a sense of transcendence, or negative, such as not accepting influence or evading conflict, because a new life event must be faced, leading to the couple's adjustment.

In this sense, approaching the empty nest stage correctly depends on the strategies employed by the couple in each stage of the family life cycle, including the lessons learned. This makes the difference between the experiences of satisfied and dissatisfied couples. According to Costa et al. (2020), the empty nest period can be an opportunity to build a new relationship with the same person, to renew it. However, both men and women may think that change is no longer possible, that renewing the relationship after so many years is very difficult, especially for dissatisfied marriages, which perceive this as unlikely. Additionally, some people in marital unions believe that this

stage of life can be used to focus on personal interests, achieve personal goals, and enjoy their relationship, while still keeping an eye on their children but in a more relaxed manner.

However, the experience of a satisfied or unsatisfied relationship during the empty nest stage does not only depend on what the couple does or omits in this phase, but on everything cultivated throughout the years of their relationship. This aligns with the findings of *Brisini et al.* (2018), who explain that the changes a couple experiences once their children leave the home can affect the internal dynamics of the marital relationship, either positively or negatively, thus increasing or decreasing marital satisfaction. When this happens, spouses become aware of various issues they hadn't noticed before, such as preferring to avoid conflict or even considering separation.

In line with *Beytía* (2017), when there is a positive opinion of the partner, as well as a relationship of cooperation and mutual care, fewer conflict situations occur within the relationship. The combination of positive elements, such as affection and admiration, approaching the other person, resolving conflicts positively, and a sense of transcendence, can be favorable for the couple's happiness (*Gottman & Silver*, 2015). These aspects may be particularly relevant in the Colombian context, where the expression of affection and physical contact play an important role in both family and social relationships in general.

It has been observed that although men may appear emotionally strong and insensitive, they are perceptive to their wives' expressions of affection. The sense of transcendence, especially from a spiritual perspective, is significant for Colombian marriages, even more so in contemporary times. This aspect is emphasized by those who are satisfied with their relationships, as they report feeling support, recognition, and unconditionality from their partner. In contrast, individuals who are dissatisfied—both men and women—express that they sometimes feel ignored and, at other times, attacked, a situation that leads to emotional distance, guardedness towards their partner, and a lack of interest in sharing their difficulties.

According to *Pérez and Estrada* (2006), the most significant decrease in marital satisfaction, after the birth of the first child, occurs when children leave home. While a drop in satisfaction levels may occur, this is not exclusively linked to the empty nest stage but rather to the accumulation of various positive or negative experiences, the passage of years, and different events, which together form a collection of experiences that are transferred and synthesized in the level of satisfaction with the marital relationship.

One limitation of the study is the sample size. While qualitative studies seek to delve into the experiences of each participant, their aim is not to generalize the results to all marriages going through the empty nest stage. Therefore, it is suggested that future research includes quantitative studies to explore the experiences of spouses during this phase and compare them with the qualitative findings. In Colombia, compared to other countries, this is a phenomenon experienced differently, due to the prevailing tendency to overprotect children and allow or encourage them to continue living in the family home, even when they are autonomous, responsible, and have the financial means to live independently of their parents.

## Conclusions

The empty nest stage is an event that needs to be faced together as a couple; however, there are differences in the way each spouse experiences the departure of the children. These differences primarily stem from the roles each person plays within the household and how parenthood has been understood and assumed. Some women show that they associate this process with sadness, depression, and pain. Nevertheless, when properly managed, it offers an opportunity to reconsider themselves and their interests, as well as to strengthen their relationship with their

partner. On the other hand, men may also experience sadness at their children leaving home, but some embrace the achievement of their children's independence with joy, as it means relinquishing both material and psychological responsibilities and the satisfaction of seeing their children succeed.

Satisfaction is related to the acceptance of different stages of life and the establishment of deep processes of mutual understanding within the couple, including power balance, as well as acceptance of difficulties and flaws. It also involves acts of validation, the expression of needs, the management of positive and negative feelings, and empathy. Those who are dissatisfied fail to achieve cohesion with their partner and face difficulties without solving them. The way they tend to address these issues is through avoidance, ceasing to express their frustrations and needs, and believing that the solution to the conflict lies in changing the other person. These thoughts and feelings reflect a high level of dissatisfaction.

Regarding aspects not addressed by the interviewees, neither men nor women made any reference to the sexual dimension—specifically, they did not talk about their intimacy in that regard. It is possible that, during this stage, sexual activity has decreased or deteriorated.

Although the experience of the empty nest is a personal phenomenon, it would be interesting to include the voices of others, such as the children, in order to gain a more holistic understanding of this event in people's lives.

Furthermore, it would be important to study whether the level of autonomy of each spouse in relation to their self-care activities influences marital satisfaction during this stage, especially considering that, with age, spouses may have experienced a decline in their health. This aspect is not addressed in the theory of Gottman and Gottman, particularly because their work has focused on studying relationships among younger individuals. Likewise, it may be valuable to investigate whether the separation from grandchildren impacts the experience of the empty nest stage, as grandchildren bring great joy to individuals and may also serve to strengthen the couple's relationship. In the Latin American and specifically Colombian context, emotional bonds and daily interactions with children, grandchildren, and other relatives are part of the cultural tradition.

## References

- Acevedo, V. E., Restrepo, L. y Tovar, J. R. (2007). Parejas satisfechas de larga duración en la ciudad de Cali. *Pensamiento Psicológico*, 3, 85-107. <https://doi.org/10.11144/73>
- Barrera, F. (2002). *Una aproximación al estudio de los determinantes de la crianza: perspectiva multivariada* [Documento CESO N.º 24]. Universidad de los Andes.
- Bastida, R., Valdez, J., Valor, I., González, N. y Rivera, S. (2017). Satisfacción marital y estado civil como factores protectores de la depresión y ansiedad. *Revista Argentina de Clínica Psicológica*, 1(2), 15-16. <https://core.ac.uk/reader/154796460>
- Beytía, P. (2018). *The efficiency of subjective well-being: A key of Latin American development*. En M. Masaheli, G. Bula, y S. E. Harrington (eds.), *Latin American perspectives on global development*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Bolio, A. (2012). Husserl y la fenomenología trascendental: perspectivas del sujeto en las ciencias del siglo XX. *Reencuentro*, 65. <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=34024824004>
- Bouchard, G. (2018). A dyadic examination of marital quality at the Empty-Nest phase. *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 86(1), 34-50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091415017691285>



- Brisini, K. S., Haunani, D. y Nussbaum, J. (2018). Transitions in marriage: Types, turbulence, and transition processing activities. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 35(6), 831-853. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407517699283>
- Cabrera, L. (2016). *Inteligencia emocional y satisfacción marital en profesionistas del área de psicología* [tesis de pregrado. Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México]. <http://ri.uaemex.mx/handle/20.500.11799/58951>
- Cadena. P., Rendón, R., Aguilar, J., Salinas, E., de la Cruz, F., Sangerman, D. M. (2017). Métodos cuantitativos, métodos cualitativos o su combinación en la investigación: un acercamiento en las ciencias sociales. *Revista Mexicana de Ciencias Agrícolas*, 8(7). <https://www.re-dalyc.org/pdf/2631/263153520009.pdf>
- Carter, B. y McGoldrick, M. (2005). Overview. The expanded family life cycle: Individual family and social perspectives. En B. Carter y M. McGoldrick (eds.), *The expanded family life cycle: Individual family and social perspectives* (3rd ed., pp. 1-26). Allyn and Bacon.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. SAGE Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. y Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. SAGE Publications.
- Costa, V., Bulhões, C. y Nagashima, A. (2020). “Quando os pássaros voam”: a família momento de “ninho vazio”. *Revista de Enfermagem da UFSM*, 10(14), 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.5902/2179769236601>
- Cuervo, J. (2013). Parejas viables que perduran en el tiempo. *Diversitas: Perspectivas Psicológicas*, 9(2), 257-270. <https://doi.org/10.15332/s1794-9998.2013.0002.02>
- De Miguel, M. (2015). *Síndrome del nido vacío: ¿qué pasa cuando los hijos se van?* [tesis de pregrado, Universidad de Aconcagua. Argentina]. <http://bibliotecadigital.uda.edu.ar/fichas.php?idobjeto=516>
- Gerson, R. (1995). The family life cycle: Phases, stages, and crises. En R. H. Mikesell, D. D. Lusterman y S. H. McDaniel (eds.), *Integrating family therapy: Handbook of family psychology and systems theory* (pp. 91-111). American Psychological Association. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/10172-005>
- Gottman, J. M. y Gottman, J. (2013). Difficulties with clients in Gottman method couple's therapy. En A. W. Wolf, M. R. Goldfried y J. C. Muran (eds.), *Transforming negative reactions to clients: From frustration to compassion* (pp. 91-112). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13940-004>
- Gottman, J. M. y Krokoff, L. J. (2000). Marital interaction and satisfaction: A longitudinal view. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 57(1), 47-52. <https://doi.org/10.1111.322.1567b>
- Gottman, J. M. y Schwartz, J. (2008). Gottman method couple therapy. En A. S. Gurman (ed). *Clinical handbook of couple therapy* (pp. 138-166). The Guilford Press.
- Gottman, J. M. y Silver, N. (2015). *The seven principles for making marriage work: A practical guide from the country's foremost relationship expert*. Harmony Books.
- Hernández, R., Fernández, C. y Baptista, M. P. (2010). *Metodología de la investigación* (5.ª ed.). McGraw-Hill.

- Johnson, M. D., Somerville, S. D., Galambos, N. L. y Krahn, H. J. (2020). Stuck in the middle with you: Predictors of commitment in midlife. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 44(3), 273-278. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0165025419885025>
- Karney, B., Bradbury, T. y Johnson, M. (1999). Deconstructing stability. En J. Adams y W. Jones (eds.), *Handbook of interpersonal commitment and relationship stability* (pp. 481-499). Kluwer Academic.
- Kulik, L. (2016). Spousal role allocation and equity in older couples. En J. Bookwala (ed.), *Couple relationships in the middle and later years: Their nature, complexity, and role in health and illness* (pp. 135-155). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/14897-008>
- Lucarelli, A. y Wittner, V. (2019). *Satisfacción conyugal: variables determinantes*. Trabajo presentado en el XI Congreso Internacional de Investigación y Práctica Profesional en Psicología, Universidad de Buenos Aires. <https://www.aacademica.org/000-111/928>
- Nina-Estrella, R. (2011). ¿Que nos mantiene juntos? Explorando el compromiso y las estrategias de mantenimiento en la relación marital. *Revista Intercontinental de Psicología y Educación*, 13(2). <https://www.redalyc.org/pdf/802/80220774010.pdf>
- Pérez, G. y Estrada, S. (2006). Intimidad y comunicación en cuatro etapas de la vida de pareja: su relación con la satisfacción marital. *Archivos Hispanoamericanos de Sexología*, XII(2), 133-163. <http://biblio.upmx.mx/Estudios/Documentos/matrimonio0116.asp>
- Sánchez, R. (2009). Expectativas, percepción de estabilidad y estrategias de mantenimiento en las relaciones amorosas. *Enseñanza e Investigación en Psicología*, 14, 229-243.
- Sartori, A. y Zilberman, M. (2009). Revisitando o conceito de síndrome do ninho vazio. *Archives of Clinical Psychiatry*, 36(3), 112-121. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0101-60832009000300005>
- Strauss, A. y Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research techniques*. SAGE Publications.
- Wang, L., Shentu, Q., Xu, B. y Liang, Y. (2020). The prevalence of anxiety on the empty-nest elders in China. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 25(2), 152-160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135910531877672>
- Zepeda, G. D. y Sánchez, R. (2021). Impacto de la cercanía, toque afectivo y satisfacción con el apoyo de la pareja en los comportamientos saludables. *Psicogente*, 24(45), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.17081/psico.24.45.3736>