

Marital Satisfaction and Perceived Social Support as Vulnerability Factors to Depression

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Abstract

The present study investigated the predictive association of marital satisfaction with depression and whether perceived social support mediates the relationship of marital satisfaction with depression in married couples. Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMSS; Schumm, Scanlon, Crow, Green, & Buckler, 1983), Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988), and Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CESD; Radloff, 1977) were administered on a sample of 100 couples. Linear and Stepwise Regression analyses were applied to analyze the data. The analyses reveal a significant predictive relationship of Marital Satisfaction with Depression ($R^2 = .068$, $F = 7.196$, $p < .05$) and Perceived Social Support ($R^2 = .221$, $F = 27.874$, $p < .05$) and of Perceived Social Support with Depression ($R^2 = .231$, $F = 29.399$, $p < .05$). Moreover, Perceived Social Support significantly mediated the relationship of Marital Satisfaction with Depression ($F = 14.682$, $df = 2, 97$, $p < .05$).

Key words: Marital Satisfaction, Perceived Social Support, Depression, married couples

1.0.Introduction

Marriage is a form of legal commitment which holds significant implications for both the couples and for the whole family. It not only helps in placing the couple into a strong relationship but also establishes various levels of relationships within a family (Benokraitis, 1996). In general, it is seen that couples who are married are expected to assist each other in various domains for instance dealing with economic responsibilities, engaging in sexual activities, bearing and raising children, etc. The bond a family shares as a unit depends a lot on the level of satisfaction and harmony a couple shares in a marriage. Hence, marital satisfaction is the variable of interest in the present study along with depression and perceived social support.

As far as marital satisfaction is concerned, it is seen as the most significant feature in the success of the marriage. There is not one complete agreed upon definition of marital satisfaction. Few of the widely stated definitions of marital satisfaction are included here. Rowe (2004) cited marital satisfaction to be the amount of contentment that a couple feels about their relationship whereas Rho (1989) defined marital satisfaction as a subjective evaluation by an individual of the degree of happiness, pleasure, or fulfillment experienced within the marital relationship between spouse and self. Moreover, Schumm, Scanlon, Crow, Green, and Buckler (1983) stated it as spouse's general perception of his or her marriage and spousal relationship. This can be a positive or a negative satisfaction towards the quality of marriage. It is generally believed that marriages in which there is a discrepancy between the partners in mate value and the personality characteristics, results in both partners to be unfaithful, signaling marital dissatisfaction. On the other hand, marital dissatisfaction is also noticed to have a very profound impact on the psychological well being and mental soundness of the couples.

It is found to be associated with numerous issues (Heaton & Albrecht, 1991) one of which is depressive symptoms (e.g. Beach & O'Leary, 1993a, 1993b; Fincham, Beach, Harold, & Osborne, 1997). One of the etiological models of depression is known as '*Marital Discord Model of Depression*' which is connected with marital dissatisfaction (Beach, Sandeen, & O'Leary, 1990). A host of other studies have demonstrated a negative relationship between marital satisfaction and depression (e.g., Beach, Katz, Kim, & Brody, 2003; Beach & O'Leary, 1993; Whisman, 2001; Whisman & Bruce, 1999; Mead, 2002).

The studies investigating the interaction between marital satisfaction and depression have shown a steady decline in depressive symptoms in the newly married as compared to the unmarried individuals, supporting marriage as a protective factor against depression (Horwitz, 1996). However, it is also noted that marriage alone is not considered to be the protective factor rather the marital functioning and spouse's mental health is also considered to play a vital role. Well-adjusted couples report fewer depressive symptoms as compared to maritally distressed couples (Beach & Fincham, 1998). Therefore, although marriage can buffer a couple from depression, at the same time, marital dysfunction may be a risk factor for developing depression.

Taking into account the profound consequences of marital dissatisfaction for couples, researchers are consistently striving to find out ways to overcome the problems related with marital dissatisfaction and depression. One such identified pathway is social support. Cobb (1976) explained the concept of social support as the faith an individual has on being valued. According to Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet and Farley (1988), most authors have reached to a conclusion that perceived social support is the better predictor of psychological status than objectively measured social support (e.g. Barrera, 1981; Brandt & Weinert, 1981; Sarason, Sarason, Potter, & Antoni, 1985; Schaefer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1981). According to Pierce (1996), the person who receives support consciously feels that the support provided to him is by a network member. The social support network consists of family members, coworkers, peers within the community, and social service professionals (Cobb, 1976).

Various researches have shown that when a partner elicits a great deal of supportive behavior, love and affection along with spousal care, more marital satisfaction will be experienced by the couple (Cutrona & Suhr, 1994). Moreover, it is also reported that intimate spousal support leads to marital satisfaction (e.g., Cutrona, Suhr, & MacFarlane, 1990; Kurdek, 2005; Pasch & Bradbury, 1998; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1994). More spousal support leads to more satisfying marriages as compared to those who have a decreased support level (e.g., Acitelli & Antonucci, 1994; Katz, Beach, & Anderson, 1996).

On the other hand, it has also been observed that perceived social support, instead of merely protecting an individual against the negative impact of stress, may itself be important in ameliorating depressive symptoms. Whereas lack of perceived or actual social support is not just a manifestation of depression itself, rather lack of social support contributes to the creation of depressive symptoms (Aneshensel & Stone, 1982). Moreover, past research on stress-buffering effects of social support indicates that social support protect us from the stress and the effect of stress on depressive symptoms is weaker among those married people with high levels of support (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Hence perceived social support appears to play a vital role in not only enhancing the marital satisfaction a couple experiences but also has a significant contribution in reducing the level of depression a couple is faced with. Thus, existing literature highlights the buffering role of perceived social support in association with both marital satisfaction and depression.

In a nut shell, previous researches have indicated that marital dissatisfaction which leads to depression can be unhealthy, both physically and psychologically (Kiecolt- Glaser & Newton, 2001). Social interactions, occupational productivity and family dynamics get severely disturbed (Mead, 2002). On the other hand, it has also been indicated that if the couple is provided with an adequate amount of social support, it not only lessens marital dissatisfaction but also reduces depression. With respect to the existing literature, this study is an effort to investigate the predictive association of marital dissatisfaction with depression. Moreover, the mediating role of perceived social support between marital satisfaction and depression would also be examined.

1.1. Hypotheses

1. There would be a predictive relationship between marital satisfaction and depression.
2. There would be a predictive relationship between marital satisfaction and perceived social support.
3. There would be a predictive relationship between perceived social support and depression.
4. Perceived social support would mediate the relationship of marital satisfaction with depression.

2.0. Method

2.1. Sample

Purposive sampling technique was used for the selection of participants. Sample of 100 couples (100 husbands and 100 wives) was recruited from various community settings of Karachi, Pakistan. Their age ranged from 25-45 years with mean age of 33.37 years ($SD = 5.419$) for total sample; 31.05 years ($SD = 4.565$) for wives; and 35.69 years ($SD = 5.228$) for husband. Their minimum educational qualification was Intermediate. Couples who were married for less than two years and those couples who had no children were excluded. Couples with the history of medical and psychological problems were removed because of their potential impact on mental health of an individual. These measures were taken as a control.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview Form

Brief Semi-Structured Interview Form held information pertaining to Personal characteristics, Academics, Family history, and presence of Psychological and Medical problems.

2.2.2. Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMSS)

To assess the level of marital satisfaction, KMSS (Schumm, Scanlon, Crow, Green, & Buckler, 1983) was used. KMSS's each item ranges from 1 to 7. Highest score indicates high level of satisfaction while lowest score indicates low level of satisfaction. Total score on the KMSS can range from 3 to 21. Schumm, Jurich, Bollman and Bugaighis (1985) reported Cronbach's alpha for the KMSS as .84 with test-retest reliability as .71.

2.2.3. Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CESD)

CESD (Radloff, 1977) was utilized to measure symptoms of depression in a community population. The scale comprises of 20 items. Out of these twenty items, item 4, 8, 12, 16 have reversed scoring. Subjects are asked to rate all the 20 items on a 4-point Likert scale. The scores ranged from 0 to 60; higher scores elicit severe depressive symptoms. A score of 16 or higher was identified in early studies as identifying as a cut-off point.

2.2.4. Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)

MSPSS is a 12-items scale for social support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). It was framed to evaluate the perceptions of social support from three specific domains: *Family*, *Friends* and *Significant Others*. It has a 7-point Likert scale. The range of possible scores is 12-84. The higher the sum of the 12 items, higher the level of social support. Scale has the Cronbach alpha level of .88. Test-retest reliability of the scale was reported to be .85 (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988).

2.3. Procedure

Couples were approached at various community areas by first taking an appointment through telephone calls prior to the scale administration to avoid intrusion in their busy routines which helped in approaching only those couples who gave consent to participate. Each couple was approached on the appointment date at their residential localities. After greeting the couple, whole procedure was explained to them and confidentiality of their personal data was assured. Consent Form was administered to take formal consent. After taking formal consent, the administration was done on the individual basis and one partner of a couple was attended at a time.

The administration of research measures is done in the following sequence. First, the participants were interviewed using the Semi- Structured Interview Form after which KMSS (Schumm, Scanlon, Crow, Green, & Buckler, 1983) was administered followed by MSPSS (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). Then a break of 10 minutes was given to overcome the impact of fatigue. Afterwards administration of CESD (Radloff, 1977) was conducted. At the end, participants were thanked for their time and cooperation.

2.4. Scoring & Statistical Analysis

After data collection, KMSS (Schumm, Scanlon, Crow, Green, & Buckler, 1983); MSPSS (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988); and CESD (Radloff, 1977) were scored according to the standard scoring procedures. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, V-20.0) was employed to analyze the data. To test the hypotheses of the present study, Linear and Stepwise Regression Analyses were computed. Descriptive statistics was also employed.

2.5. Results & Discussion

The present study aimed at investigating how marital satisfaction affects the level of depression experienced by the married couples and how social support mediates the relationship between marital satisfaction and depression. Key findings obtained in the study are as follow:

Firstly, the analysis reveals a significant predictive relationship of marital satisfaction with depression ($R^2 = .071$, $F = 15.046$, $p < .05$). These findings are congruent with the devised hypothesis and validate the previous researches (e.g., Beach, Katz, Kim, & Brody, 2003; Beach & O'Leary, 1993; Whisman, 2001; Whisman & Bruce, 1999). Evidences from longitudinal researches also appear to be in line with the findings of the present study. Longitudinal studies indicate that marital dissatisfaction predicts increase in depressive symptoms over time (Beach & O'Leary, 1993a, 1993b; Fincham, Beach, Harold, & Osborne, 1997).

Various reasons can be attributed to the findings of the first hypothesis. In order to bring contentment in a married life, marital quality needs to be harvested. Equilibrium over the course of marriage plays a very significant role in the mental health of the couples (Gove & Shin 1989; Lamb, Lee, & DeMarris, 2003; Ross, Mirowsky, & Goldsteen, 1990). To illustrate, when two individuals decide of spending their life together, they commit themselves with each other. This commitment and the bond they develop with the passage of time after their marriage would predict how smoothly their marital life is climbing the ladders of harmony, attachment, love, mutual respect, peace, bond, sense of belongingness, and above all satisfaction with their marriages. Marriage is devoted to be a two-way process in which sharing and caring takes place at both ends. If one partner fails to accommodate or compromise over the course of marriage, conflicting state would rise. This would further lead the couple to experience marital discord. Such a devastating state can produce harmful results which can hinder the harmonious growth of the marital bond. Couples, if not fostering the basic elements for a peaceful martial life, face extreme form of mood irregularities ranging from low mood to depressed phases due to the insecurities stemming from the distant marital relationship. Another reason behind distant marital relationship and decline in the marital satisfaction is the lack of communication between partners as posited by Gottman (1999) that couples are supposed to arrange for a dialogue in order to solve issues between them. A married couple is the basic unit of the family which in future will give rise to a whole family and govern them. If the couple lacks proper communication skill and interacts with each other in a maladaptive manner, they surely will suffer from dejected feelings, and as a consequence depressive affect will be observed in their general conversation pattern.

Secondly, the analysis reveals a significant predictive association between marital satisfaction and perceived social support ($R^2 = .149$, $F = 34.748$, $p < .05$). The results yielded are consistent with the previous studies (e.g. Pasch, Bradbury, & Davila, 1997; Carels & Baucom, 1999; Xu & Burleson, 2001). Several researchers have supported the notion that marriage is a bond and that marital quality and the process with which a marriage functions is more important than the marriage itself only. When two individuals decide on spending their lives together, they tie a knot of life time bond and commitment. Hence, one reason could be the commitment and the sense of security a partner experiences. Marriage is said to be a legal, formalized commitment which facilitates association in a network that could potentially provide social support and influences one's well-being (Cotton, 1999). When partners believe that their spouse is fully committed with them and is fully supportive, the level of security would dramatically increase which in turn positively impacts one's level of marital satisfaction. Moreover, marriage can be a source of emotional support, spousal support and economic support for the couples (Waite, 2000). Partners are most likely to be turned to for support in time of need which further strengthens the marital bond (Beach, Fincham, Katz, & Bradbury, 1996).

Another reason could be, as life moves on, during the early years of the marriage, life comparatively appears to be smoother. Since it is also devised as the honeymoon period, a couple tries their level best to cater and attend fully to their partner's needs. However, as the time passes, the quality drops and keeps on deteriorating the bonding gradually. In such circumstances, they tend to ignore the amount of support they initially provided to each other which in turn affects the level of marital satisfaction in them as a couple. Therefore, one the major reason why marital satisfaction is linked to social support is the connectivity the couple cherished over the passing years in a marriage. There comes a point in a life when the couple realizes that the life is not what they fantasized it to be, which remarkably shakes their sense of marital satisfaction and perception of social support.

Thirdly, the statistical analysis of the data revealed perceived social support as a significant predictor of depression ($R^2 = .173$, $F = 41.560$, $p < .05$). Under the light of previous researches, it is discovered that mere perception of social support is better than the actual support while predicting depression. The feeling of a strong social network can at times do wonders and help struggle against psychological stressors. With respect to our own culture, family ties are very important. As mentioned earlier that Asian community is more or less a follower of collectivistic culture. When it comes to in depth study of family functioning, any aspect can have both a dark and a bright side of it. Similarly, the concept of closely bonded families helps in eradicating psychological tumult by providing the sense of support when ever needed. Proximity plays a vital role in such situations. When the family members live close to each other, they function as a protective factor against psychological turmoil. They can productively contribute in the psychological well-being of the overall family as a unit as well as the couple. Support by family members, at times, can assist them to handle the issue and can save the couple from feeling more distressed. Cotton (1999) described that when the level of social support decreases, depression's level increases. A decline in depression resulting from stressful life events is observed when the spouse elicits supportive behavior (Brown & Harris, 1978; Chou & Chi, 2001). Social support may change the way we think by encouraging us to positively attribute to an otherwise negative event in life (Joiner, 2001). Therefore, an encouraging, loving, supportive partner, friend or family member can help in reducing the stress and as well as the affective issues stemming from the daily routine.

Lastly, analysis reveals that perceived social support significantly mediates the relationship of marital satisfaction with depression. Marital satisfaction ($F = 15.046$, $df = 1$, 198 , $p < .05$) individually explained 7.1% variation in depression, however, this variation increased to 18.6% ($F = 22.567$, $df = 2$, 197 , $p < .05$) with the inclusion of perceived social support in the equation at Step II. As mentioned above also, social support is believed to be a possible reducer of stress and depression (Green & Rodgers, 2001). Married people reporting higher degrees of intimate emotional support are tend to report lower levels of depression (Stack & Eshleman, 1998). In a parallel context, Cutrona (1996) also discovered the similar trend in which he found that available intimate emotional support is very beneficial in preventing distress from turning into depression. Moreover, the presence of a supportive marital relationship is linked to less depression vulnerability in that marriage lessens one's susceptibility to experiencing distress (Davila, Bradbury, Cohan, & Tochluk, 1997). Moreover, Dehle, Larsen, and Landers (2001) mentioned that perceived social support is positively associated with marital quality and negatively associated with depressive symptoms. On the other hand, individuals reporting higher spousal support were more likely to report higher levels of marital satisfaction, fewer symptoms of depression, and more manageable stress levels (Purdom, Lucas, & Miller, 2006). With reference to the sample studied in the present study, cultural values seem to play a very strong role in predicting how a family functions and how spousal interaction takes place. As a matter of fact, in our society, the head of the family takes decisions.

As a culture specific custom, the important decision of choosing a life partner is often taken by the parents of the couple. This is how the arrange marriages take place. In such marriages, again the role of elders, specifically that of parents seems to play an important part in building the bond between the couple. Thus when not provided with such a supporting family, a couple will feel divided and will never be able to base their relationship on eternal harmony and bond. When a family fails to foster marital bond between the couple through their support, guidance and experience, such couples usually fail to handle difficult situations in life. Moreover, they would also lack the ability to be decisive and control challenging state of affairs confidently. At times, when families don't transfer their valuable experiences in dealing with marital discord, couple would feel as if they are left in isolation and that the absence of vigilance will leave them in a distraught psychological state.

2.6. Conclusion

Thus, it can be concluded that marital satisfaction of couples with social support can manifest dynamic results. This way, couples would feel more contented and satisfied with their marriages. Although marital distress leads to a decline in the affective aspect yet if cushioned with supporting network, marital quality can be enhanced and distress can be eliminated. These findings have implications for educational and clinical interventions. Moreover, this study would also have its significance especially for mental health professionals in our own Pakistani society. It would help them to formulate effective strategies by incorporating social support networks and interventions so that depressive symptoms could be eliminated in married couples.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Variables of Marital Satisfaction, Perceived Social Support and Depression and for the Age of Entire Sample

Variables	Husbands (n = 100)		Wives (n = 100)		Total sample (N = 200)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Marital Satisfaction	18.22	3.28	17.39	3.36	17.8	3.341
Perceived Social Support	67.58	10.14	65.61	11.017	66.55	10.616
Depression	9.99	7.025	14.19	8.66	12.09	8.147
Age	35.69	5.228	31.05	4.565	33.37	5.419

Table 2: Summary of Linear Regression with Marital Satisfaction (MS) and Perceived Social Support (PSS) as predictor of Depression

Predictors	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>Adj R</i> ²
Marital Satisfaction	.266	.071	.066
Perceived Social Support	.417	.173	.169

Table 3: Summary of Linear Regression with Marital Satisfaction (MS) as predictor of Perceived Social Support

Predictors	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>Adj R</i> ²
Marital Satisfaction	.386	.149	.145

Table 4: Stepwise Regression Analysis Predicting Depression (DEP) from the variables of Marital Satisfaction (MS) and Perceived Social Support (PSS) on Entire Sample

Variables Entered	Model Summary			ANOVA		Coefficient				
	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>Adj R</i> ²	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	Unstandardized Coefficient		Standardized Coefficient	<i>t</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
						<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>		
Constant						23.628	3.026		7.808	.000
MS	.266	.071	.066	15.046	.000	-.648	.167	-.266	-3.88	.000
Step II										
Constant						36.279	3.710		9.778	.000
MS	.432	.186	.178	22.567	.000	-.300	.170	-.123	-1.77	.079
PSS						-.283	.053	-.369	-5.29	.000