

Adult Attachment Functioning and Marital Quality: A Psychosocial Study on Early & Middle Adults

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Abstract

Marital quality, adjustment and post-marital family harmony have been considered to be significant precursors to adult well-being. The research aimed to find out gender differences, if any, among early and middle-adult participants. It also sought interactions/ interconnections between adult attachment style, stressful life events and marital quality of male and female early and middle adults aged between 25 and 45 years. Each participant individually filled out self-report measures such as the Relationship Structure Scale and the Marital Quality Scale. Snowball sampling was used to collect data from a sample of 45 couple participants aged 25 to 45 years. Statistical analyses were done. Statistical analyses revealed no significant gender difference in the marital quality of the participants. Global Avoidance, Global Anxiety and Anxious Attachment Styles are the predictors of high scores on the Marital Quality Scale (higher score indicates poorer marital quality). Discussion and implications throw light on policy-making in the area of family and marital therapy and the rights and well-being of children.

Keywords: Marital Quality, marital satisfaction, attachment functioning, adulthood.

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Marriage is an important/ significant milestone in the adult lifespan and thus provides an important setting for adult development and growth. Marital stability and quality are benchmark variables that sum up an adult's overall evaluation of marital health and contribute to overall well-being through diverse pathways. Marital dissolution and divorce may affect the health and well-being of the members of the dyad by enhancing poor health behaviour (Cohen et al., 1991; Horowitz & White, 1991), adverse social outcomes (Vogt Yuan, 2014; Goldberg et al., 1992; Broese van Groenou, 1991), and adverse economic outcomes (Smock, 1994; Smock & Manning, 1999). Research undertaken in India claims divorce to be associated with acute psychological problems and emotional distress, which are more pronounced for women (Ramachandrapa, 2012), along with reductions in overall subjective well-being and life dissatisfaction from social stigma (Kaneez, 2015), economic problems (Di Prete & McManus, 2000) and emotional problems in the offspring (Ramachandrapa, 2012).

Literature Review & Background

Although divorce and separation rates in India have risen in the last few years, it is still less alarming compared to Western countries (Luxembourg, 87% and the USA, around 46%) (The Print, 2019). This does not, however, establish a higher rate of happy marriages. According to a 2016 study by Jacob & Chattopadhyay using divorce data from the 2001 to 2011 Census of India, an estimated 1.36 million people in India are divorced, making up about 0.24% of the total married populace and 0.11% of the total population. Separation rates were almost three times higher than the legal divorce rate, amounting to 0.61% of the married population and 0.29% of the total population (Biswas, 2016). The comparatively lower rate of divorce, therefore, can supposedly be attributed to financial dependence, social stigma and the difficult legal process that a divorce entails by and large. Under such circumstances, it goes without saying that any

probe into such dynamics that become successful predictors of satisfied or dissatisfied courses of marriage should be undoubtedly relevant as a research agenda.

Attachment Functioning and Marital Quality

The major theoretical frameworks concerning variables that forecast marital outcomes integrate adult attachment in the recent research literature on marriage and attachment.

Attachment represents an important construct for predicting success in close relationships in childhood, adolescence and adulthood (Sroufe, 2005).

In his pioneering work on attachment, Bowlby (1969/1982) posited that infant-caregiver bonds early on in life promoted survival and that such bonds should be universal (Bowlby, 1969/1982). Generalized attachment representations have been proposed to influence very close relationships and influence parental, marital or long-term committed romantic relationships (Waters et al., 2005). Ainsworth's classification of attachment styles described three distinct styles of attachment, ranging from secure, anxious- and ambivalent to avoidant (Ainsworth et al., 1978). While generalized attachment representations are assumed to have a global influence on adult thinking, emotions and behaviour in close relationships, adults may tailor their representations to adjust for the different relationship dynamics and demands across different attachment affiliations and eventually acquire representations specific to particular relationships (Treboux et al., 2004; Creasy & Ladd, 2005; Roisman et al, 2005; Furman & Simon, 2006). Attachment styles later in life, are rooted in early experiences, albeit, they do not solely determine whether people become secure or insecure as adults (Frailey & Roisman, 2019). Therefore, supportive early caregiving might create insecure adult relationships and vice versa. Thus, important questions remain unanswered about how and when attachment changes. Hazan and Shaver (1987) concluded that attachment styles of romantic couples were similar to the

original Ainsworth classification, of secure, avoidant and anxious-ambivalent attachment styles. According to Bartholomew (1990), there should be four attachment prototypes attachment security, avoidance, preoccupation and fearfulness.

Karney & Bradbury (1995) posited that marital quality is best predicted by relationship cognitions and behaviour, personality and developmental history as enduring vulnerabilities impinge on marital cognitions and behaviour, in their *Vulnerability- Stress Adaptation Perspective*. According to this framework, adult attachment functioning is key to marital satisfaction/quality. It is a crucial enduring vulnerability and predicts marital quality and stability. According to Karney and Bradbury (1995), such a relationship between attachment and marital quality is indirect, and secure and insecurely attached people may encounter different stressors or possess different stress appraisals that, in turn, affect marital quality. In subsequent revisions of the theory by Davila, Karney, and Bradbury (1999), it was acknowledged that attachment, stressful life events and marital quality could adopt reciprocal pathways; that is, a highly satisfying marriage could impact stress perception or even influence attachment functioning.

More contemporary theoretical approaches to attachment have focused on the beneficial effects of secure and positive ties on personal growth and development. Mikulincer and Shaver (2007), in their research on attachment, related positive attachment to the “broaden-and-build” framework and linked positive appraisal of secure attachment relations to variables like emotional stability, personal growth, and satisfactory close ties.

Feeney & Collins (2015), in their theory on ‘thriving in relationships’, creates a framework, according to which thriving can occur during adversity and people emerge stronger from it. Drawing upon the traditional attachment theories, that introduce attachment figures as

secure bases, Feeney & Collins (2015), propose that strong bonds with others act as buffers from stressful experiences and create what they call SOS (Source of Strength) support.

Marital quality is a multidimensional concept, often overlapping with related concepts of marital satisfaction, marital happiness and others. There is a wide assortment of demographic, dispositional and situational variables (e.g. personality traits and dimensions, age, gender, family constellation dynamics, living conditions, socioeconomic status, educational background, emotional intelligence so on and so forth) that could be used to study marital quality and its stability/ success over time. Nurhayati et al., (2019), reported *having children and changes in marriage* (Gottman & Notarius, 2000; Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008; Hirschberger et.al., 2009; Ahlberg et al., 2009); *Personality* (Renshaw et al., 2010; Claxton et al., 2012; Najarpourian, 2012); *Religiosity & Spirituality*, (Mahoney et al, 1999; Lopez et.al., 2011; Schramm et.al., 2012); *Gender Role Attitude* (Kaufman & Taniguchi, 2006; Stanick & Bryant, 2012); *Coping strategy* (Wunderer & Schneewind, 2008; Badr et al, 2010; Bodenmann et.al., 2011); *Communication* (Ledermann, 2011); *Relationship Maintenance Factors* (Badr & Taylor, 2010; Maliner et.al., 2012) and *Economy & financial factors* (Khezri, 2020) to be linked to marital quality, in their conceptual review of factors that might affect the quality of a marriage over time. The pre-existent scientific literature on the crucial variable of attachment style and marital quality seems to be sparse.

Collectivism and Marital Outcomes

The marital milestone originates from multiple biological psycho-socio-cultural considerations, evolutionary goals and normative prescriptions. Though most of the above premises do have universal applications, culturally embedded variations are also noted in them. Collectivism endorses a whole new set of parameters and concerns related to successful ageing,

growth and development across the life span in contrast to individualism. Thus, definitions and descriptions of quality can vary herein, and insights accessed through research in one might differ intrinsically from the other.

Very little research addressing the impact of adult attachment functioning on self-reported marital well-being has been done in India, (the exceptions being studies by Shah et al, 2018; Heideri & Kumar, 2021 and Eyob, 2016) all of which have found positive associations between secure attachment styles and self-reported marital satisfaction and couple well-being. Such studies however need to be complimented by further probes addressing issues unique to a patriarchal socio-cultural background as that of India.

Although encouraging the well-known psychological health and well-being-related advantages attached to a stable marital partnership, collectivism and patriarchy discourage marital discord or disruptions with social ostracism and stigma (and practical adversities) and pose challenges for the separated partners or the children from the union. As marital dissolution challenges the basic premise of collectivism, the actual process of divorce comes with formidable challenges and threats both legally and socially. Keeping an eye on these constraints, the current research would want to uncover variables mediating and facilitating marital quality, satisfaction and stability in the collectivistic socio-cultural context.

Objectives

The research aimed at finding gender differences among male and female participants in the reported marital quality, identifying the relationship between marital quality and attachment style (measured through the “Global Anxiety and Global Avoidance in the Relationship Structure

questionnaire) of the adult participants, and assessing the relative contribution of attachment style to overall marital quality experienced by the participants.

Method

Sample

The Snowball sampling technique was used for the study. The sample consisted of 45 couple participants (men and women) (a total of 90 participants finally selected for participation) married to each other, aged between 25 to 45 years, married for at least five (05) years, having a minimum of one (01) child, aged at least two (02) years. All participants had completed high school education and came from nuclear families with working husbands.

Tools

Initially, the participants were made to fill out a personal information schedule screening them on the inclusion and exclusion criteria developed for the work. The schedule contained demographic data, age of marriage, number and age of children and data regarding psychiatric illness and consultation, if any.

All participants completed two self-report instruments: the Relationship Structure Questionnaire (RSQ) (Fraley, 2006), which consists of 10 items to assess attachment patterns in very close relationships with four target partners in the dyad - mother, father, romantic partner, and best friend. The test-retest reliability is 0.65 for romantic relationships and 0.80 for parental relationships. Additionally, the Marital Quality Scale (Shah, 1991), is a multi-dimensional scale, with 50 items to be rated on a 4-point scale. The scale rigorously evaluates 12 dimensions, encompassing understanding, rejection, satisfaction, affection, despair, decision-making, discontent, dissolution potential, dominance, self-disclosure, trust, and role functioning. The test-

retest reliability for this scale was found to be 0.83. Participants contacted through snowball sampling were asked to fill out a consent form and on giving consent for participation, they filled out a personal information schedule. Data collection was followed by statistical analyses (t-test, Product-Moment Correlation and Stepwise Multiple Regression Analyses). The 0.05 and 0.01 levels of significance were accepted for analyses and interpretation.

Results

The t-test analyses for gender differences in the perception of marital quality reveal no significant difference as such for the present sample. Thus, male and female marital quality do not differ significantly in this sample. The Product-moment coefficient of correlation indicates a significant positive correlation between scores on marital quality (higher scores on the Marital Quality Scale indicate poorer marital quality) and *Global Anxiety* and *Global Avoidance* (variables assessing attachment styles) at the 0.01 significance level. Thus, *avoidant* and *anxious* attachment styles were found to be higher in couples experiencing poorer marital quality. The Stepwise Multiple Regression analyses reveal a significant contribution of *global anxiety* and *avoidance* scores on the total Marital Quality score of the participants.

Table 1

Results of T-test Analysis Examining the Significance of Difference Between Male and Female Scores on Marital Quality

Variable	Male	Female	t- value

	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Marital Quality	95.31	23.06	95.09	26.02	.043

Note. The table demonstrates that the difference between the mean marital quality of male and female participants is insignificant.

Table 2

Results of Correlations, Between Attachment Style (Global Avoidance and Global Anxiety) And Marital Quality.

Attachment Style	Marital Quality
Global Avoidance	.483**
Global Anxiety	.482**

Note. Attachment style, denoted by Global Avoidance and Global Anxiety are significantly positively correlated to marital quality. The correlations are significant at 0.01 level.

**significant at 0.01 level

Table 3

Results of the Stepwise Multiple Regression Analysis (SMRA) Representing Significant Contributory variables to Marital Quality

Dependent variable	Significant	R Square	beta
Marital Quality	Global	.233	.483**
	Global Avoidance	.288	.298**

Note. The table demonstrates that Global Anxiety and Global Avoidance significantly contribute to marital quality.

** indicates significance at 0.1

Discussion

As marital satisfaction and happiness are benchmark variables for marital researchers, it has popularly been linked to attachment functioning. The correlation between attachment functioning and self-reported marital satisfaction is consistently strong. Secure adults often report higher marital satisfaction than insecure adults (Davila et al., 1998; Davila & Bradbury, 2001; Feeney, 1994, 1999; Hollist & Miller, 2005; Lassier et al., 1997; Mayseless et al., 1997; Treboux et al., 2004). Secure attachment style often acts as a buffer during potential marital stressors like infertility (Mikulciner, 1998; Feeney & Collins, 2015), transition to parenthood (Curran, 1995), and family illness (Berant & others, 2003).

Since most of the previous research, addressing the connection between attachment functioning and marital satisfaction has been based on an individualistic socio-cultural set-up, the current research addresses the dearth of available counterparts in the collectivistic socio-

cultural context. The somewhat distinctive life expectations and age and history-graded norms prevalent in a collectivistic society, owing to the traditional patriarchal values endorsed therein, pose a new set of challenges for marital partnerships and dissolution.

The findings from this research corroborate with the previous studies, as the perception of marital satisfaction is significantly positively correlated to attachment patterns, and attachment functioning contributes significantly to the overall better marital quality of the participating couples. The findings thus echo that secure attachment functioning is a valuable resource for marital couples. It has already been proposed in previous literature that attachment as an organizational construct could, at any age level, serve as a major buffer from past and present adverse events (Sroufe, 2005; Creasy & Jarvis, 2009; Feeney & Collins, 2015). Creasy and Jarvis (2009) also claim that attachment security serves as a moderator variable sometimes in marital interactions, moderating personal/contextual risk factors in marital functioning such as highly critical/ non-engaged/ emotionally unstable partners or chronically impoverished living conditions; and as a mediator variable sometimes, between the association between enduring vulnerabilities and marital health with changes in attachment functioning over time. Little research has traced the ontogeny of attachment over the course of a marriage (Treboux et al., 2004; Crowell et al., 2002; Davila et al., 1999; Simpson et al., 2002), focusing mostly on newly-wed couples for brief periods. Longitudinal research tracing the evolution of attachment functioning across the marital life cycle could be insightful here. Overall, such insights might help in altering the goals of family, relationship and marital counselling, reducing the rates of divorce and the related casualties, and enhancing opportunities for better couple engagement and superior marital quality in societies wherein staying in a marriage is less challenging than dissolving it.

Conclusions

The study shows that attachment functioning positively correlates with perceived marital quality in the chosen sample. The correlation between anxious and avoidant attachment styles and poorer marital quality in Indian couples is undeniable. A more secure attachment style unquestionably leads to a better perception of marital quality. As the rates of divorce have been sharply rising around the world, an insight into factors that control and are correlated to marital quality can help reduce the rising rates of marital disharmony and dissolution.

Limitations

Complimenting the quantitative tools with qualitative structured/ semi-structured in-depth interviews could have allowed for more robust findings across the age groups. The self-report measurements could have been coupled with projective tools for a more accurate and reliable portrayal of the couple participants' actual perceptions of the relevant variables. However, since the study only accepted willing and consenting participants, the problem of dishonest responses could have been diminished.

A larger sample size might have led to more generalizable findings and ensured more representations of each of the age groups within the 25 to 45 age range included in the sample.

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