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Emotional Unavailability and Marital Satisfaction: Alexithymia Among Married Men

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ABSTRACT

The present study aimed to examine the impact of alexithymia among married onto their own marital satisfaction. The sample of the present study comprised of 98 married men selected via purposive sampling. The participants were aged between 25-45 years ($M=33.61$, $SD=4.02$). The measures followed after filling demographic form are: ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS; Fowers & Olson, 1993) and Toronto Alexithymia scale (TAS-20; Bagby et al., 1994). Linear regression analysis was utilized to test the hypothesis of the present study. The results predicted significant association and contribution of married men's alexithymia onto their marital satisfaction i.e. alexithymia caused 12.7% variance ($R^2 = .127$, $F(1, 98) = 13.996$, $p < .001$) in the scores of marital satisfaction. The results will have important clinical implications and will serve as foundation for future studies, given that it is the pioneering investigation of alexithymia and marital satisfaction among married men in Pakistan.

Keywords: Emotional Unavailability, Marital Satisfaction, Alexithymia, Married Men, Regression

INTRODUCTION

Marital satisfaction is described as individual's evaluation of marital quality of one's marital relationship. It assesses the level to which each partner feels contented in their relationship, it also involves to which degree they feel emotionally connected and fulfilled in their marriage (Spanier, 1976). Marital satisfaction is not only limited to the relationship only, it does have impact on individual's physiological health, emotional wellbeing and psychological distress (Finchman & Beach, 2010). Finchman and Beach (2010) concluded from their study that high

levels of marital satisfaction is associated with lower stress, better physical health and greater emotional wellbeing while lower levels of marital satisfaction is associated with psychological distress, conflicts and relationship dissolution.

Marital satisfaction is shaped by variety of factors which includes personal traits of individual, conflict management skills, emotional closeness and communication patterns (Bradbury et al., 2000). Effective communication is one of the key foundations for the intimate relationship, and it can be hindered by a personality construct called Alexithymia. Alexithymia is a construct which focuses on difficulty in identifying feeling, difficulty in expressing emotions and externally oriented thinking style (Taylor et al., 1997). Individuals exhibiting high levels of alexithymia often struggle with emotional closeness, reduced emotional intimacy, and misunderstandings as they struggle with identification and articulation of emotions (Taylor et al., 1997).

Alexithymia may pose considerable challenges in intimate relationships (Karukivi & Saarijarvi, 2014). In particular, men are often socialized to suppress their emotions which results in heightened disconnection with their emotions and might lead to dissatisfaction in marriage (Levant et al., 2009). Restricted emotional vulnerability and societal pressure can lead men to not being able to identify emotions and communicate effectively (Taylor et al., 1997). There are studies which have concluded that emotional inexpressiveness causes distress in marital relationship often leading to dissatisfaction with in marriage (Swenson, 2008; Fisher & Manstead, 2000). Due to these social influences men tend to score higher on alexithymia (Levant et al., 2009). Therefore, this study focuses on gaining insight of the influence of alexithymia on to emotional intimacy and how men are socialized emotionally and its impact on marital quality.

In a Pakistani culture, men are raised and trained to suppress their emotions, they are discouraged if they display emotional vulnerability which often projects as emotional disconnection with self. Sentences like 'men up' and 'be strong' are often used if men express emotions. These societal expectations are often followed by emotional disconnect within their intimate relationships. Also, there are very limited researches on alexithymia and its association with marital satisfaction among married men, this study addresses this gap by evaluating both predictive and contributive association of alexithymia on to marital satisfaction among married men in Pakistan. By specifically focusing on married men in Pakistani context, this study offers culturally meaningful insight.

It is hypothesized that Alexithymia would predict decrease in Marital Satisfaction among the Married Men.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample for this study included 98 married men who have been married for 2 years and onwards. The age ranges were from 25-45 years ($M=33.61$, $SD=4.02$) and participants were at least intermediate. Participants had one child at least as to

exclude the stressor of not having children. The participants belonged to middle and upper socioeconomic status and all were working. They were approached via purposive technique.

Measures:

Demographic Form:

The participants were asked to fill the demographic form which included basic information regarding age, qualification, profession, year of marriage, number of children and socioeconomic status.

ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale:

The ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale (EMS; Fowers & Olson, 1993) is comprised of 15 item measure on a five-point likert scale (1= Strongly Disagree to 5=Strongly Agree). It includes two subscales: Marital Satisfaction (10 items) and Idealistic Distortion (5 items). The marital satisfaction subscale covers areas such as conflict resolution, communication, financial management and intimacy while idealistic distortion assesses the perception of the relationship.

The scale has displayed strong reliability with Cronbach's alpha value of .86 and item-total correlations ranging from .52 to .82. It also shows .71 concurrent validity for men and is suitable for diverse demographic group (Fowers, 1988; Fowers & Olson, 1993)

Toronto Alexithymia Scale:

The Toronto Alexithymia Scale (TAS-20) is developed by Bagby and colleagues (1994). It is widely used measure and comprised of 20 self-report items to assess the alexithymia. Items are scored on a five-point likert scale (1= Strongly Disagree to 5= Strongly Agree). The scale comprises of three subscales:

- Difficulty in identifying feelings: problems recognizing and distinguishing emotions.
- Difficulty in expressing feelings: trouble verbalizing emotions.
- Externally oriented thinking: focus on external events over internal states.

Scores can be interpreted dimensionally or categorically: total scores ≥ 60 indicate alexithymia, 50-60 suggested possible alexithymia and ≤ 51 indicated no alexithymia. The scale demonstrated strong psychometric properties with internal consistency coefficients ranging from .80 to .83 for the total scale and acceptable reliability across all subscales (Bagby et al., 1994; Parker et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 2003). TAS-20 has been validated across diverse clinical and non-clinical population and demonstrated good cross-cultural reliability.

Procedure

Married men were recruited through purposive sampling technique and were thoroughly briefed on the objectives of the research. Informed consent was taken and they were demonstrated about the study, their right to withdraw at any point, their confidentiality and about any potential risk and benefits of the participations. To ensure the confidentiality, the participants were not required to provide their names.

After consent, the participants completed the demographic forms followed by

ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale and Toronto Alexithymia Scale. The participants were ensured any assistance they needed in the process and they were sincerely thanked for their time and cooperation.

RESULTS

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics

Variables	Married Men
	(n = 98)
	F(%)
Years of Marriage	5.7(3.315)
Socio Economic Status	
Upper Class	9(4.6)
Middle Class	88(44.9)
Lower Class	1(.5)
Family Structure	
Joint	61(31.1)
Nuclear	37(18.9)
Working Status	
Working	98(100)
Non- Working	0
Number of Children	
One	48(24.5)
Two	34(17.3)
Three	14(7.1)
Four	2(1.0)
Education	
PhD	1(.5)
MPhil	2(1.0)
Masters	45(22.9)
Graduate	44(22.4)
Intermediate	4(2.0)
Matric	2(1.0)

Table 1 represents the demographic characteristics and the data consists of 98 participants.

Table 2

Summary of Linear Regression Analysis with Alexithymia as predictor of Marital Satisfaction among married men

Model	B	SE B	β	R ²	F	Sig
Constant	50.665	2.739				
Alexithymia	-.193	.051	-.357	.127	13.996	.000**

** p<.01

Table 2 presents the results of Linear Regression Analysis conducted to examine if Alexithymia of married men are significantly associated with and contributed onto their Marital Satisfaction. The results of regression analysis showed that Alexithymia of married man explained 12.7% variance in their scores of Marital Satisfaction ($R^2=.127$, $F(1, 98) = 13.996$, $p<.05$), and significantly predicted Marital Satisfaction ($\beta= -.357$, $p<.001$).

DISCUSSION

The current study showed significant negative association of alexithymia and marital satisfaction among married men in Pakistan. These results are consistent with the existing literature that emotional awareness and emotional expression are crucial for the marital quality (Karukivi & Saarijarvi, 2014; Spitzer et al., 2005). Given the Pakistani context, emotional openness is often undermined for men, the impact of alexithymia on marital satisfaction is likely to be intensified. Men in Pakistani culture are trained to suppress their emotion and it is often equated with masculinity. Men who do not express emotions are considered to be strong and masculine which encourages emotional closeness (Levant et al., 2000). Emotional expression is also often considered as weakness and sentences like 'crying like a girl' is used if emotions are displayed by men (Levant et al., 2000). This notion may lead them to not communicate their emotional needs to their partner and which can ultimately lower their marital satisfaction (Friedman & Miller, 2011). The fear of judgement leads them to not express (Ali et al., 2011)

Another important factor to be shed light on is familial bonds in Pakistani culture, marriage is not only personal commitment but heavily influenced by family and societal expectations (Qadir et al., 2005). Joint family system is more prevalent in Pakistan and it is collectivistic in nature hence marital decisions are not only taken by couple but rather keeping in mind the family too (Qadir et al., 2005). Men often find themselves struggling with familial issues which enhances emotional disconnection and ultimately hinders marital satisfaction (Qadir et al., 2005).

In a collectivistic culture, family harmony is often prioritized and vulnerable emotions are often viewed threatening to family unity (Qureshi & Rarieya, 2007). Men are also considered as 'anchor' of the family and vulnerability shown by them is often discouraged and brought in shame (Qureshi & Rarieya, 2007).

Men are considered to be protectors and providers of the family and them showing emotions considered as weakness demoralizes them to share (Mumtaz & Shaheed, 1987). Due to lack of communication of expression, they can feel lonely and consequently marital dissatisfaction. Men may also feel insecure to share their emotions in their marriage as they fear judgement and there is lack of safe space for men to express their emotions (Khan et al., 2008).

CONCLUSION

The present study concluded that alexithymia is significantly associated with marital satisfaction, the scores of alexithymia caused significant variance in the score

of marital satisfaction suggesting higher levels of alexithymia in married men marked by difficulty in identifying and expressing emotions impacted their own marital satisfaction negatively. Given the cultural context in which the emotional expression is often discouraged among men and these results signifies the importance of addressing emotional awareness and communication of emotions in effort to improve marital relationship.

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