

Attachment Styles, Emotion Regulation, and Marital Satisfaction among Married Couples

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between attachment styles namely avoidance and anxiety and emotion regulation strategies such as cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression and marital satisfaction among married individuals in India. A cross-sectional design was employed with 180 married participants, aged 21 years to 45 years old including both male and female. Standardized measures included the Experiences in Close Relationships–Relationship Structures Questionnaire (ECR-RS), the Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ), and the ENRICH Marital Satisfaction Scale. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Kruskal–Wallis tests, Pearson correlations, and multiple linear regression. The majority of participants (79.4%) reported moderate level of marital satisfaction. The findings revealed that there is a significant difference emerged in cognitive reappraisal across marital satisfaction groups, with individuals having high marital satisfaction reporting greater use of this strategy. Strong associations were observed between attachment avoidance and anxiety ($r = .603, p < .001$) and between cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression ($r = .751, p < .001$). The regression model explained only 1% of variance in marital satisfaction, suggesting that broader interpersonal and socio-cultural factors play a more prominent role. Findings highlight the complexity of marital satisfaction within collectivistic cultural contexts.

Keywords: *Marital Satisfaction, Attachment Style, Emotion Regulation, Cognitive Reappraisal, Expressive Suppression*

Marital satisfaction, defined as an individual's subjective appraisal of the quality, happiness, and fulfilment derived from marriage and it is a critical determinant of personal well-being and relationship stability (Locke, 1976; Spanier, 1976). It encompasses emotional intimacy, communication quality, sexual satisfaction, conflict resolution, and alignment of shared values and goals (Gottman, 1994; Gottman & Silver, 1999). Growing evidence links high marital satisfaction with superior physical health, better sleep, and reduced psychological distress, whereas marital distress is associated with mood disorders, anxiety, and occupational impairment (Margelisch et al., 2015; Troxel et al., 2007; Rehman et al., 2007).

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Attachment theory posits that early relational experiences with caregivers form internal working models that shape adult intimacy and emotional functioning (Bowlby, 1982). The insecure attachment particularly, the avoidance styles is characterised by emotional distancing and suppression of attachment needs and anxiety attachment style is marked by hypervigilance to rejection and intense reassurance seeking (Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). These dimensions were reported to be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction (Banse, 2004; Ayenew, 2016). Emotion regulation specifically cognitive reappraisal strategies such as reframing emotional meaning and expressive suppression such as inhibiting emotional expression serves as a key mechanism linking attachment orientations to relational outcomes (Gross & John, 2003; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019). Cognitive reappraisal is generally adaptive whereas habitual suppression is associated with poorer psychological health and interpersonal functioning (Gross & John, 2003). Despite theoretical coherence, the integrated influence of attachment and emotion regulation on marital satisfaction in Indian couples has not been systematically investigated.

The present study therefore aimed to (a) assess relationships among attachment style, emotion regulation, and marital satisfaction; (b) examine group differences across satisfaction levels and (c) determine whether attachment and emotion regulation predict marital satisfaction in an Indian married sample.

METHOD

Participants

A cross-sectional convenience sample of 180 married adults (92 male, 88 female; age range 21–45 years; M age group = 31–35 years) was recruited from India. Inclusion criteria required marriage duration of at least six months cohabiting together. Individuals with diagnosed psychiatric or neurological conditions or those currently undergoing therapy were excluded. The sample size was calculated a priori based on the effect sizes reported by Abbasi et al. (2016), yielding a minimum required sample of (N = 121) participants, but the final sample of 180 participants was successfully recruited and included in the analysis, exceeding this threshold and enhancing the statistical power of the study. The data was collected after obtaining the institutional ethical approval following all the ethical considerations.

Measures

- **Attachment-** The Experiences in Close Relationships–Relationship Structures Questionnaire (ECR-RS; Fraley et al., 2011) measured avoidance (6 items) and anxiety (3 items) on 7-point Likert scales. Cronbach's α values range from .87–.92 (avoidance) and .75–.91 (anxiety).
- **Emotion regulation-** The Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ; Gross & John, 2003) assessed cognitive reappraisal (5 items; $\alpha = .80$) and expressive suppression (5 items; $\alpha = .73$) on 7-point scales.
- **Marital satisfaction-** The ENRICH Marital Satisfaction (EMS) scale (15 items; $\alpha = .92$) assessed overall satisfaction, with a reported $\alpha = .936$ for Indian samples (Chauhan & Sekher, 2023).

Procedure

Participants completed a paper-based survey administered after providing written informed consent. Data were analysed in SPSS using descriptive statistics, Kruskal–Wallis tests with Duncan post hoc comparisons, Pearson correlations, and multiple linear regression.

RESULTS

The assessment of the marital satisfaction among the participants revealed the majority of them (79.4%) had moderate level of marital satisfaction, 3.9% reported high satisfaction and 16.7% had mild level of marital satisfaction.

Table 1 *Kruskal–Wallis Comparison of Psychological Variables across Marital Satisfaction Groups*

Variable	MS Group	N	Mean	SD	H	p value
Avoidance	Mild	30	3.20	1.47	0.987	0.610
	Moderate	143	3.01	1.29		
	High	7	2.81	1.03		
Anxiety	Mild	30	3.43	1.99	0.167	0.920
	Moderate	143	3.28	1.83		
	High	7	3.29	1.80		
Cognitive Reappraisal	Mild	30	4.48	1.09	7.783	0.020*
	Moderate	143	4.17	1.01		
	High	7	5.05	0.62		
Expressive Suppression	Mild	30	4.26	1.05	1.838	0.399
	Moderate	143	4.21	0.97		
	High	7	4.75	1.09		

Note. MS = marital satisfaction * $p < .05$.

Table 1 reveals the comparison between the groups using Kruskal–Wallis Test based on marital satisfaction revealed that there is no significant difference based on the attachment styles i.e., avoidance attachment or anxiety attachment style. But, there was significant difference between the groups based on the emotional regulation such as ($H = 7.783$, $p = .020$), with highly satisfied participants reporting the highest mean use ($M = 5.05$, $SD = 0.62$) relative to moderate ($M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.01$) and mild groups ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 1.09$). Expressive suppression did not differ significantly across groups ($H = 1.838$, $p = .399$).

Table 2 *Pearson Correlations between Marital Satisfaction, Attachment Dimensions, and Emotion Regulation Strategies*

Variable	1. MS	2. Avoid.	3. Anxiety	4. CR	5. ES
Marital Satisfaction		-0.144	-0.128	0.035	0.032
p value		0.054	0.087	0.642	0.665
Avoidance			.603**	0.068	0.032
p value			0.000	0.361	0.674
Anxiety				.162*	.176*
p value				0.030	0.018
Cognitive Reappraisal					.751**
p value					0.000
Expressive Suppression					—

Note. MS = Marital Satisfaction; Avoid. = Avoidance; CR = Cognitive Reappraisal; ES = Expressive Suppression. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2 results showed that marital satisfaction was not significantly related to avoidance ($r = -.144$, $p = .054$), anxiety ($r = -.128$, $p = .087$), cognitive reappraisal ($r = .035$, $p = .642$), or expressive suppression ($r = .032$, $p = .665$). However, avoidance and anxiety attachment styles were strongly correlated ($r = .603$, $p < .001$) and cognitive reappraisal and expressive

suppression were strongly correlated ($r = .751, p < .001$). Anxiety was weakly but significantly associated with both cognitive reappraisal ($r = .162, p = .030$) and expressive suppression ($r = .176, p = .018$). Multiple regression confirmed that the four predictors collectively did not significantly explain marital satisfaction ($R^2 = .010, F(4, 175) = 0.438, p = .781$).

DISCUSSION

Contrary to the study hypotheses and the predictions of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), neither attachment avoidance and anxiety nor emotion regulation strategies significantly predicted or correlated with marital satisfaction. This pattern is consistent with accounts emphasizing that marital satisfaction in collectivistic, family-oriented cultures such as India is shaped more by social norms, family dynamics, and commitment to marital roles than by individual psychological characteristics (Dion & Dion, 1993; Gupta & Singh, 2012). Cultural pressures toward relational harmony may sustain reported satisfaction irrespective of internal emotional difficulties, attenuating the effect sizes documented in predominantly Western literature.

The significant association between attachment dimensions and the strong co-occurrence of the two emotion regulation strategies nevertheless confirms that these constructs are psychologically meaningful within this sample. The co-occurrence of avoidance and anxiety ($r = .603$) reflects the multidimensional nature of insecure attachment. The anxious individuals used both cognitive reappraisal and expressive suppression more frequently aligns with findings that hyperactivating attachment strategies heighten emotional reactivity and motivate greater regulatory effort (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). The unexpectedly strong correlation between reappraisal and suppression ($r = .751$) may reflect regulatory flexibility rather than trait reliance on a single strategy (Bonanno & Burton, 2013). The results indicating that participants with high marital satisfaction were using cognitive appraisal as the emotional regulation strategy aligns with prior evidence that adaptive reappraisal supports constructive conflict management and positive partner perceptions (Gross, 1998; Overall et al., 2010). However, this group-level trend did not translate into significant individual-level predictions, likely because the high-satisfaction subgroup was very small ($n = 7$), limiting statistical power. Further, the regression analysis revealed that the measured variables accounted for only 1% of the variance in marital satisfaction. This minor effect highlights that unmeasured variable such as communication quality, emotional intimacy, conflict resolution strategies, marriage duration, and financial stressors likely account for the preponderance of the variance. This finding is highly consistent with Karney and Bradbury's (1995) Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model, which posits that marital quality is a dynamic process heavily dictated by adaptive processes and external environmental stressors rather than individual demographic or psychological traits alone.

Limitations of the study is that it is cross sectional study where it captures date at single point in time. Furthermore, the study did not take into account the socio demographic factors such as socioeconomic status, age, or marriage duration which represent significant, unmeasured confounding variables heavily tied to marital dynamics. The results may also be subject to social desirability as well and the results cannot be generalized to broader culturally diverse population as the sampling did not include samples from various geographical variance.

Future research should incorporate longitudinal designs, larger and more diverse Indian samples, and measures of relational processes such as communication and intimacy.

Culturally adapted couple interventions targeting cognitive reappraisal skills may be a promising avenue given its consistent alignment with higher marital satisfaction in the study.

CONCLUSION

Marital satisfaction among Indian couples was not directly determined by attachment style or emotion regulation strategies. Instead, findings underscore the multifaceted nature of marital satisfaction and the importance of relational, contextual, and cultural factors. The study highlights cognitive reappraisal as a potentially meaningful correlate of marital satisfaction and contributes to the limited evidence base on attachment and emotion regulation within collectivistic Indian contexts.

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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