



Gratitude, Self-Disclosure, And Self-Esteem As Predictors Of Marital Adjustment: An Empirical Study

Heena Tiwari, Research Scholar, Department of Psychology, Mohanlal Sukhadia University, Udaipur

Dr. Varsha Sharma, Assistant Professor, Department of Psychology, Mohanlal Sukhadia University, Udaipur

Abstract

The present study examined the predictive role of gratitude, self-disclosure, and self-esteem in marital adjustment among married individuals in the Indian context. A sample of 400 participants (200 couples) was selected using purposive sampling. Standardized measures, including the Gratitude Questionnaire (GQ-6), Emotional Self-Disclosure Scale, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and Marital Adjustment Inventory, were used for data collection.

Pearson correlation analysis revealed that marital adjustment was significantly and positively associated with gratitude ($r = .664$), self-disclosure ($r = .625$), and self-esteem ($r = .602$). Multiple regression analysis showed that the predictors jointly explained 71.3% of the variance in marital adjustment ($R^2 = .713$, $p < .001$). Gratitude emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by self-disclosure and self-esteem.

The findings highlight the importance of positive psychological factors in marital functioning and suggest their relevance for marital counseling and intervention programs.

Keywords: Gratitude, Self-Disclosure, Self-Esteem, Marital Adjustment

Introduction

Marriage is one of the most enduring human institutions, functioning as both a personal and societal system across cultures. Anthropologically, it institutionalizes sexual partnership, legitimizes procreation, regulates inheritance, and provides emotional and economic interdependence (Finkel et al., 2014). Over time, the purpose of marriage has evolved from primarily economic and reproductive arrangements to relationships centered on emotional intimacy, companionship, and personal fulfillment (Cherlin, 2020). In contemporary societies, marital success is increasingly evaluated not only by stability but also by the degree of psychological intimacy and satisfaction experienced by partners (Karney & Bradbury, 2020).

Globally, the meaning and structure of marriage have undergone significant transformation. Individualistic societies emphasize personal fulfillment, autonomy, and equality within marital relationships (Lauer & Yodanis, 2019). In contrast, collectivist cultures—such as those in Asia and the Middle East—situate

marriage within broader kinship systems, shaped by familial expectations and social norms (Goodwin & Cramer, 2022). These cultural frameworks influence how marital roles are negotiated, how conflicts are managed, and how adjustment within marriage is understood .

In the Indian context, marriage remains a central social institution, often regarded as both a sacrament and a contractual relationship (Uberoi, 2016). Despite rapid modernization, urbanization, and increasing individual choice in partner selection, traditional structures such as patriarchal norms and joint-family systems continue to influence marital dynamics. Contemporary Indian marriages reflect a transitional phase, combining traditional expectations with emerging values of companionship, communication, and emotional support (Fuller & Narasimhan, 2020; Menon & Shweder, 2023). Although the prevalence of marriage remains high, recent trends indicate increasing marital stress, including incompatibility, gender role conflicts, and emotional alienation (Chauhan et al., 2023). While divorce rates in India remain relatively low, they are gradually rising in urban areas (Registrar General of India, 2022).

Marital adjustment refers to the process through which spouses accommodate each other and establish equilibrium within the relationship. Early conceptualizations defined it as the accommodation of two individuals within the marital system (Locke, 1951). Contemporary perspectives conceptualize marital adjustment as a multidimensional construct encompassing satisfaction, cohesion, consensus, and affectional expression (Spanier, 1976). Unlike marital satisfaction, which reflects subjective well-being, marital adjustment involves dynamic processes through which couples negotiate differences and maintain relational balance (Bradbury & Karney, 2019).

The emergence of positive psychology marked a shift from a deficit-oriented approach toward understanding strengths that promote relationship flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Within this framework, relationships are viewed not merely as sources of conflict but as contexts for growth and well-being (Fincham & Beach, 2010). Constructs such as gratitude, self-disclosure, and self-esteem have been increasingly recognized as important predictors of marital quality (Algoe, 2012; Laurenceau et al., 2005; Orth & Robins, 2020).

Gratitude, defined as the appreciation of benefits received from others, functions as a moral and relational emotion that strengthens interpersonal bonds and promotes prosocial behavior (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Algoe, 2012). Self-disclosure, involving the sharing of personal thoughts and emotions, facilitates intimacy, trust, and mutual understanding within relationships (Jourard, 1971; Reis & Shaver, 1988). Self-esteem, reflecting an individual's overall sense of self-worth, influences emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and responsiveness within marital interactions (Rosenberg, 1965; Murray et al., 2000).

Although these constructs have been widely studied individually, there is a relative lack of integrative research examining their combined influence on marital adjustment, particularly within non-Western contexts. In India, existing studies have largely focused on demographic variables or isolated psychological factors, with limited attention to comprehensive models that incorporate multiple positive psychological constructs (Kumari & Sharma, 2021; Singh & Kaur, 2021). Furthermore, cultural factors such as collectivism, family structure, and gender norms necessitate context-specific investigation.

Therefore, the present study aims to examine the combined and interactive roles of gratitude, self-disclosure, and self-esteem in predicting marital adjustment within the Indian socio-cultural context. By integrating affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions within a culturally grounded framework, this research seeks

to contribute to both theoretical advancement and practical applications in marital counseling and mental health interventions.

Review of Literature

Marital adjustment has been widely conceptualized as a dynamic and multidimensional process involving satisfaction, cohesion, consensus, and emotional expression within a marital relationship (Spanier, 1976; Bradbury & Karney, 2019). Earlier research emphasized stability and role conformity as indicators of successful marriage (Burgess & Cottrell, 1939), whereas contemporary perspectives highlight psychological, interpersonal, and contextual determinants of marital functioning.

Positive Psychological Predictors of Marital Adjustment

Recent decades have witnessed a shift toward identifying strengths that promote relational well-being. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that positive psychological traits such as gratitude, empathy, optimism, and forgiveness are significantly associated with marital quality, with moderate effect sizes (Yoo et al., 2022). Among these, gratitude, self-disclosure, and self-esteem have been identified as particularly influential due to their affective, behavioral, and cognitive nature, respectively.

Gratitude and Marital Adjustment

Gratitude has emerged as a key predictor of relationship quality. Empirical findings consistently demonstrate a positive association between gratitude and marital satisfaction, with meta-analytic correlations ranging from $r = .30$ to $.50$ (Algoe et al., 2021). Gratitude enhances perceived partner responsiveness, strengthens emotional bonds, and promotes prosocial behaviors within relationships (Algoe, 2012).

Longitudinal and experimental studies further support its causal role. For instance, Lambert et al. (2010) found that gratitude buffers the negative effects of daily stress on marital satisfaction, while Algoe and Zhaoyang (2016) demonstrated that expressions of gratitude predict increases in relationship commitment over time. Intervention-based studies, such as gratitude journaling, have shown significant improvements in relationship satisfaction within a few weeks (Rash et al., 2011).

In the Indian context, gratitude has also shown strong predictive value. Singh and Kaur (2021) reported that gratitude significantly predicted marital adjustment ($r \approx .41$), accounting for approximately 18% of the variance. Cultural research indicates that gratitude in collectivist societies is often expressed behaviorally rather than verbally and is closely linked with moral obligation and relational harmony (Rastogi & Therly, 2020).

Self-Disclosure and Marital Adjustment

Self-disclosure, defined as the sharing of personal thoughts and emotions, plays a crucial role in developing intimacy and trust within marital relationships (Jourard, 1971). The Interpersonal Process Model of Intimacy posits that disclosure combined with partner responsiveness fosters closeness and relationship satisfaction (Reis & Shaver, 1988).

Meta-analytic findings indicate a strong association between self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction ($r \approx .39-.42$) (Collins & Miller, 1994; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004). Longitudinal studies have demonstrated that emotional disclosure predicts sustained intimacy and satisfaction over time (Laurenceau & Kleinman, 2006). Furthermore, reciprocal disclosure has been identified as a stronger predictor of marital quality than the amount of disclosure alone.

Indian studies, though limited, support these findings. Singh and Bhatnagar (2019) reported that emotional openness significantly predicted marital satisfaction ($r \approx .38$), while Nandwana and Rathore (2018) found that self-disclosure moderated the relationship between stress and marital adjustment. However, cultural norms in collectivist settings may restrict overt emotional expression, emphasizing harmony and indirect communication instead (Chen, 2019).

Self-Esteem and Marital Adjustment

Self-esteem, conceptualized as an individual's overall sense of self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965), has been consistently linked to relationship quality. Meta-analytic evidence suggests a moderate association between self-esteem and marital satisfaction ($r \approx .29$) (Luciano & Orth, 2017). Individuals with high self-esteem demonstrate better emotional regulation, constructive conflict resolution, and resilience in relationships (Orth & Robins, 2020).

Longitudinal research indicates bidirectional effects, where higher self-esteem predicts better relationship outcomes, and satisfying relationships, in turn, enhance self-esteem (Orth et al., 2018). Additionally, self-esteem buffers against rejection sensitivity and maladaptive responses during conflict (Murray et al., 2000).

Indian research aligns with global findings. Kumar and Rohatgi (2019) reported that self-esteem significantly predicted marital adjustment among professionals ($\beta = .38, p < .01$), while Goyal and Nakra (2024) identified gender-specific patterns in how self-esteem relates to marital functioning. Discrepancies in spousal self-esteem have also been linked to maladjustment (Padhye, 2016).

Integrated Models and Interrelationships

Emerging research suggests that gratitude, self-disclosure, and self-esteem do not operate independently but interact dynamically. Don et al. (2023) found that perceived partner gratitude enhances self-esteem, which in turn promotes greater self-disclosure, forming a relational chain that supports adjustment. Similarly, Tiwari and Paliwal (2022) reported that self-esteem partially mediates the relationship between gratitude and marital adjustment.

These findings align with the Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation (VSA) model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995), which conceptualizes marital quality as the outcome of interactions between personal vulnerabilities, external stressors, and adaptive processes. Within this framework, self-esteem functions as a personal resource, while gratitude and self-disclosure operate as adaptive relational processes.

Cultural Context of Marital Adjustment

Cultural factors significantly shape marital dynamics. In collectivist societies like India, marriage extends beyond the couple to include family systems, social roles, and moral expectations (Uberoi, 2016). Emotional expression, gratitude, and self-worth are influenced by cultural norms emphasizing harmony, duty, and relational interdependence (Rao & Paranjpe, 2016).

Research indicates that the effects of psychological variables may vary across family structures. For instance, the impact of gratitude on marital satisfaction has been found to be stronger in nuclear families compared to joint families (Singh & Kaur, 2021). Similarly, gender norms influence patterns of disclosure and self-esteem, often placing greater emotional expectations on women (Kapadia, 2020).

Summary and Research Gap

Overall, existing literature demonstrates that gratitude, self-disclosure, and self-esteem are significant predictors of marital adjustment. However, most studies have examined these variables independently, with limited research exploring their combined and interactive effects, particularly within the Indian socio-cultural context. Additionally, much of the existing research relies on Western theoretical frameworks and measurement tools, which may not fully capture culturally embedded relational processes.

Therefore, the present study aims to address this gap by examining an integrative model of marital adjustment that incorporates gratitude, self-disclosure, and self-esteem within an Indian cultural framework.

Methodology

Research Design

The present study employed a quantitative, correlational research design to examine the predictive role of gratitude, self-disclosure, and self-esteem on marital adjustment among married couples. This design was considered appropriate as it allows for the investigation of relationships among variables and the extent to which independent variables predict the dependent variable .

Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To examine the predictive role of gratitude on marital adjustment.
2. To examine the predictive role of self-disclosure on marital adjustment.
3. To examine the predictive role of self-esteem on marital adjustment.

Hypotheses of the Study

The following null hypotheses were formulated:

1. Gratitude will not significantly predict marital adjustment.
2. Self-disclosure will not significantly predict marital adjustment.
3. Self-esteem will not significantly predict marital adjustment.

Variables of the Study

Independent Variables (Predictors):

1. Gratitude
2. Self-disclosure
3. Self-esteem

Dependent Variable (criterion):

1. Marital Adjustment

Sample

The sample consisted of 400 participants (200 married couples) selected from Jaipur, Rajasthan. Participants were selected using a purposive sampling technique, ensuring that individuals met the criteria relevant to the study.

Inclusion Criteria

1. Participants were selected based on the following criteria:
2. Married individuals aged between 35 and 55 years
3. Individuals in an ongoing marital relationship
4. Educated participants capable of understanding the questionnaire
5. Willingness to participate voluntarily

Exclusion Criteria

The following participants were excluded:

1. Individuals with major physical or psychological illness
2. Couples living separately for extended periods
3. Individuals with severe physical disabilities affecting participation

Tools for Data Collection

The study utilized standardized psychological instruments:

1. Marital Adjustment Inventory (MAI)

Developed by Singh (1972), this scale measures marital adjustment across dimensions such as emotional bonding, cooperation, and satisfaction. Higher scores indicate better marital adjustment.

2. Gratitude Questionnaire–Six Item Form (GQ-6)

Developed by McCullough, Emmons, and Tsang (2002), this scale assesses dispositional gratitude. It consists of six items rated on a Likert scale, with higher scores reflecting greater gratitude.

3. Emotional Self-Disclosure Scale (ESDS)

Developed by Snell, Miller, and Belk, this scale measures the extent to which individuals share personal emotions with others, particularly within close relationships.

4. Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)

Developed by Rosenberg (1965), this widely used instrument measures global self-esteem. Higher scores indicate higher self-worth and self-acceptance.

All instruments used in the study have demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity in previous research.

Procedure

Participants were approached personally and informed about the purpose of the study. After obtaining informed consent, the questionnaires were administered individually. Participants were instructed to respond honestly based on their personal experiences. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured.

Completed responses were collected and screened for completeness before being prepared for statistical analysis .

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics. The following statistical techniques were employed:

Descriptive Statistics (Mean, Standard Deviation):

To summarize the basic characteristics of the data.

Pearson Product–Moment Correlation:

To examine the relationships among gratitude, self-disclosure, self-esteem, and marital adjustment.

Multiple Regression Analysis:

To determine the predictive contribution of gratitude, self-disclosure, and self-esteem on marital adjustment.

ANOVA (within regression):

To test the overall significance of the regression model.

Collinearity Diagnostics (Tolerance & VIF):

To ensure absence of multicollinearity among predictors.

These analyses enabled a comprehensive examination of both relationships and predictive effects among the study variables .

Results

Preliminary Analysis

All variables satisfied the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Skewness and kurtosis values were within acceptable limits, and standardized residuals ranged between -2.7 and $+2.9$, indicating no serious deviations from normality. Collinearity diagnostics revealed tolerance values between $.82$ and $.84$ and Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) between 1.20 and 1.23 , confirming the absence of multicollinearity among predictor variables.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics indicated moderate levels of all variables in the overall sample ($N = 400$). The mean score for gratitude was 32.09 ($SD = 6.17$), self-disclosure was 23.99 ($SD = 7.35$), self-esteem was 27.04 ($SD = 6.11$), and marital adjustment was 131.69 ($SD = 17.35$). These values suggest a generally balanced distribution of psychological characteristics among participants, with relatively higher variability observed in marital adjustment scores.

Correlation Analysis

Pearson correlation analysis revealed that marital adjustment was strongly and positively correlated with all three predictor variables:

Gratitude ($r = .664$, $p < .001$)

Self-disclosure ($r = .625, p < .001$)

Self-esteem ($r = .602, p < .001$)

These results indicate that individuals who report higher gratitude, greater emotional openness, and stronger self-worth tend to experience better marital adjustment.

Additionally, moderate intercorrelations were observed among the predictor variables ($r \approx .33-.34$), suggesting that while related, they represent distinct psychological constructs suitable for regression analysis .

Multiple Regression Analysis

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine the predictive role of gratitude, self-disclosure, and self-esteem on marital adjustment.

Model Summary

The regression model was found to be highly significant,

$F(3, 396) = 327.33, p < .001$.

$R = .844$

$R^2 = .713$

Adjusted $R^2 = .710$

This indicates that approximately 71.3% of the variance in marital adjustment is explained by the combined effect of gratitude, self-disclosure, and self-esteem, reflecting a strong predictive model .

Regression Coefficients

All three predictors significantly contributed to marital adjustment:

Gratitude ($\beta = .427, t = 14.430, p < .001$)

Self-Disclosure ($\beta = .364, t = 12.274, p < .001$)

Self-Esteem ($\beta = .335, t = 11.344, p < .001$)

Gratitude emerged as the strongest predictor, followed by self-disclosure and self-esteem.

Hypothesis Testing

H_{01} (Gratitude does not predict marital adjustment) → Rejected

H_{02} (Self-disclosure does not predict marital adjustment) → Rejected

H_{03} (Self-esteem does not predict marital adjustment) → Rejected

Thus, all three psychological variables significantly predict marital adjustment.

Discussion

The present study examined the predictive role of gratitude, self-disclosure, and self-esteem in marital adjustment. The findings demonstrate that all three variables significantly and positively contribute to marital adjustment, with gratitude emerging as the strongest predictor.

Gratitude and Marital Adjustment

Gratitude showed the highest predictive strength among all variables, highlighting its central role in marital functioning. This finding is consistent with the principles of positive psychology, which emphasize the importance of positive emotions in strengthening interpersonal relationships. Gratitude promotes appreciation, enhances perceived partner responsiveness, and fosters prosocial behaviors, thereby improving relational harmony.

These findings align with previous research indicating that gratitude functions as a “relationship maintenance mechanism,” reinforcing emotional bonds and buffering against conflict. Individuals who regularly express and experience gratitude are more likely to perceive their partners positively, leading to greater marital satisfaction and adjustment.

Self-Disclosure and Marital Adjustment

Self-disclosure was found to be a significant predictor of marital adjustment, underscoring the importance of open communication in intimate relationships. This supports the interpersonal process model of intimacy, which posits that sharing personal thoughts and emotions enhances closeness and mutual understanding.

Higher levels of self-disclosure facilitate emotional validation, reduce misunderstandings, and promote trust between partners. The findings suggest that couples who engage in open and meaningful communication are better equipped to manage conflicts and maintain stable relationships. This is also consistent with social penetration theory, which emphasizes that deeper levels of disclosure lead to stronger relational bonds.

Self-Esteem and Marital Adjustment

Self-esteem also emerged as a significant predictor, indicating that individuals with a positive self-concept tend to experience better marital adjustment. High self-esteem contributes to emotional stability, confidence in relationships, and constructive conflict resolution.

Individuals with higher self-esteem are less likely to perceive rejection and more likely to engage in adaptive interpersonal behaviors, thereby enhancing relationship quality. This finding supports existing literature suggesting that self-esteem acts as a psychological resource that buffers against relational stress and promotes long-term stability in marital relationships.

Integrated Interpretation

The findings collectively suggest that marital adjustment is best understood as a function of interconnected psychological processes:

Gratitude (affective component) enhances emotional bonding

Self-disclosure (behavioral component) facilitates communication and intimacy

Self-esteem (cognitive component) provides internal stability and resilience

Together, these variables form a comprehensive model explaining a substantial proportion of variance in marital adjustment. The high explanatory power ($R^2 = 71.3\%$) indicates that these predictors are not only statistically significant but also practically meaningful in understanding marital relationships.

Conclusion

The study highlights that marital adjustment is strongly influenced by positive psychological factors rather than solely demographic or structural variables. The results emphasize the importance of cultivating gratitude, promoting open communication, and strengthening self-esteem in marital relationships.

These findings have important implications for marital counseling and intervention programs, suggesting that enhancing these psychological resources can significantly improve relationship quality and long-term marital stability.

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